

## The Mineral Springs of Virginia: Virginia's Lost Landscape

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In his essay "The 19<sup>th</sup> Century Rural Landscape: the Courthouse, the Small College, the Mineral Springs, and the Country Store", John Brinkerhoff Jackson stated: "*One final southern landscape feature deserves much more study than it has so far received: the watering place or spa or mineral springs.*"<sup>1</sup> This paper presents the nineteenth century mineral springs as a particularly significant yet long neglected Virginia landscape. These mineral springs will be revealed as places of convergence and interest to landscape historians, historical landscape architects, preservationists, and contemporary designers interested in heritage landscapes, healing landscapes and tourism

The Virginia landscape has long been a place of particular interest to historians and designers alike. Its evolution, from the earliest English settlement at Jamestown through the plantation landscapes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to contemporary sustainable communities is an important chapter in the making of a truly American landscape. Despite the richness of this story, it is incomplete. Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century and lasting into the early decades of the twentieth century, a significant Virginia landscape, the mineral springs, flourished and extended the influence of the physical and social "Virginia" landscape far beyond the Tidewater towns, and Plantations.

Public use of the springs began in the mid-eighteenth century. Many of the more prominent springs, including Hot Springs, Warm Springs, Sweet Springs and Rockbridge Alum Springs were frequented by Virginians and colonists from other states well before the revolutionary war. In 1747 George Washington noted in his *Journal of My Journey over the Mountains*, that "We this day called to see the fam'd Warm Springs."<sup>2</sup> In 1756 the warm springs at Bath (now Berkley Springs, West Virginia) were given to the state by Lord Fairfax to be "forever free to the public, for the welfare of suffering humanity".<sup>3</sup> Around the springs the town of Bath was platted and among the first to purchase a lot was George Washington. By 1770 the springs had become what Carl Bridenbaugh has called "a powerful democratizing agent" a place where "the planting aristocracy, Jefferson's sturdy yeomanry, and coonskin democrats of the back woods mingled... These resorts proved a potent factor in promoting colonial union and in nourishing nascent Americanism. They were the most significant intercolonial meeting places. At the spas representatives of the aristocracy of each colony meet in person... Some came back year after year; some made lifelong friends; some began protracted correspondence."<sup>4</sup>

The best description of the springs landscape is from the *The Springs of Virginia*, by Perceval Reniers: "The region of the Virginia Springs straddled the continental divide, sprawling through the long valleys and over the equally long ridges of the Alleghenies...[with] Warm Springs at the top and Grey Sulphur Springs at the bottom.

The central axis running between them would be about 75 miles long and the transverse axis, running cross county from the east to the west between Rockbridge Alum on the east and Blue Sulphur on the west, would be approximately the same....through the center lay the inner group, the fountains most strongly impregnated with minerals, heat, fashion, and fame - the Warm, the Hot, the White Sulphur, the Sweet, the Salt Sulphur, and the Red Sulphur. For the most part they were connected by good turnpike roads, and in order to make the circuit of the lot one had to cut back and forth across the mountains, up out of one valley and down into another, travelling in all about a hundred and seventy five miles."<sup>5</sup>

The springs were in many ways the edge of culture on the early American frontier. As the frontier moved west the springs in their mountain setting became important stops in the travels of early American nature writers and foreign travelers serving as a laboratory for exploring and presenting both the designed landscape and romantic "nature". The springs were often included along with other early tourist destinations such as Natural Bridge, Peaks of Otter, Weyer's Cave and Falling Springs in tours of Virginia's natural wonders<sup>6</sup> (fig. 1 and 2). In the *Narrative of a Tour in North America*, the English Barrister, Henry Tudor wrote in 1831: "I reached for the night, one of the fashionable Virginia watering places, called Sweet Spring...having a handsome and extensive sweep of verdant ground spread out in front, of the dimensions of a park. Nothing can exceed the romantic seclusion of this beautiful spot; of which the finely sheltered situation, and many natural advantages, render it a crowded and favorite resort during the summer months." (fig's. 3 and 4) Communion with nature at the springs would become an important activity in the early nineteenth century tourist landscape and a significant component of medically prescribed healing regimens for spring visitors. A medical regimen prescribed for a visitor to Red Sulphur Springs gives some indication of the importance of the landscape in the healing process.

"If the weather and other circumstances admit, rise about 6, throw your cloak on your shoulders, visit the spring, take a small-sized tumbler of water, move about at a brisk walk; drink again at 7, and once more at half -past 7; breakfast at 8. After breakfast , if you can command a carriage, take a drive, otherwise a slow ride on horse-back until 10. From 10 to 12, enjoy yourself in conversation or other mode most agreeable to you -- eat no luncheon --at 12 take a glass of water, at 1 take another. From 12 to 1 take exercise at ten pins, quiots, billiards; dine at 2; amuse yourself in social intercourse until 5. Take a drive, ride, or walk until 6 -- drink a glass of water; exercise until 7 -- take a cracker and a cup of black tea. If you are a dancer, you may enjoy it, but in moderation, until 9-quaff a glass of water from the Spring, and retire to your room."<sup>7</sup>

By the time of the American Civil war the Virginia springs were perhaps the most important social landscape in the south. People came from throughout the south each summer to travel the springs circuit in western Virginia. Peregrine Prolix noted in 1834 that: "This tour, taken during the 'season' (the summer), lasted for as many weeks -- or months -- as the pocketbook could bear and became a fixture in the social life of the antebellum south. Thousands of visitors came annually, not only from Virginia but from

Louisiana, the Carolinas, and the other states of the Deep South." <sup>8</sup> Charlene Lewis has stated that "Each Summer, more elite whites congregated at these resorts than anywhere else in the south....The Virginia Springs formed a key part of the extensive and elaborate world of southern elite...Virginia springs shaped elite society throughout the south". <sup>9</sup> In 1838 Captain Frederick Marryat noted of White Sulphur Springs that: "...all the first old Virginia and Carolina families, many of them descendents of the old cavaliers, were at the springs when I arrived there; certainly I must say that I never was at any watering place in England where the company was so good and so select."<sup>10</sup>

The springs also served as meeting places of a wide variety of thought and social intercourse. Peregrin Prolix writing of an 1834 visit to White Sulphur Springs described the political and social mix: "from the east you have consolidationists, tariffites and philanthropists; from the middle, professors, chemical analysts and letter writers, from the west, gentlemen who can squat lower, jump higher, dive deeper, and come out drier than all creation besides, and from the south, nullifiers, union men, political economists, and statesmen; and from all quarters functionaries of all ranks, ex-candidates for all functions, and the gay agreeable and handsome of both sexes who come together at the White Sulphur to see and be seen, to chat, to Laugh and dance..." <sup>11</sup> The social mix was just as great in 1847 when John S. Skinner, writing of White Sulphur Springs for the New York Tribune observed: "The company here is increasing hourly. The last three days have added 150, and what is remarkable, they come from 14 states and Territories..." The springs were also as Charlene Lewis notes "places where southern women found rare freedom and power". <sup>12</sup> The landscape played a central role in the exercise of that freedom. Relieved from their responsibilities on the plantations, "women happily spent entire days outside – strolling, hiking, climbing, riding, fishing, picnicking, and playing lawn games."<sup>13</sup> Young people of both genders could enjoy rare unsupervised outings and excursions in the spring's landscapes. Included were "romantick rides and walks as well as fishing trips"<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth century the springs were important places in the developing American recreational landscape. Henry Lawrence has stated that the springs "were the first recreation resorts on the continent". <sup>15</sup> In the north, resort towns developed around many of the early spas but in Virginia the springs, clearly influenced by the plantation landscapes of the south, developed into a distinctive landscape compositions often comprised of a modest hotel flanked by cottages or "rows" of guest rooms whose arrangement enclosed a central park-like greenspace. (fig's. 5, 6, and 7) Porte Crayon's 1855 description of Rockbridge Alum Springs captures this distinctive springs composition: "...the lawn, enclosed by a semicircle of cottages, partially shaded with trees, its green carpet dotted with groups of gayly dressed visitors, presents a pleasing and animated picture."<sup>16</sup> The larger landscape composition at the springs included channelized streams, spring houses, bath houses, gazebos, bowling alleys, ballrooms, pavilions for music and games, a pond, icehouses, privies, and walks and gardens. The refinements that many of the springs achieved were noted by Porte Crayon who noted in 1855 that "Fauquier Sulphur Springs... surpasses all others in the extent, elegance, and costliness of its improvements. The buildings, of brick covered with slate, form a semicircle, inclosing a handsome park. These grounds are ornamented with fountains and

enlivened by herds of fallow deer." <sup>17</sup>(fig. 8) The manicured landscapes of the springs and the surrounding wilderness were more than aesthetic presentations. Each day visitors engaged those landscapes through prescribed medical regimens, social gatherings and excursions, and solitary hikes and strolls. To be in the landscape and to experience its richness was a critical component of the visitor's experience.

The Virginia springs would influence the design and development of springs across the United States from White Sulphur Springs in Ohio to Paso de Robles Hot Spring in San Luis Obispo County California developed by D.D. Blackburn in 1857. Henry Lawrence reveals that: "Mr. Blackburn had been born in Virginia but grew up 10 miles from Yellow Springs and 45 miles from White Sulphur Springs in Ohio. His resort...began with a small hotel flanked by rows of cottages on three sides with detached buildings containing parlors, billiard rooms, dining halls and bathhouses."<sup>18</sup> The influence of the spring's landscapes, however, would be wide ranging. According to Lawrence, The spring resorts in the mountains west of Charlottesville were "the most direct descendants of the Jeffersonian design [of the University of Virginia's 'academical village'] and would become an important link in the American campus design tradition"<sup>19</sup> (fig. 9). Their influence on later landscape compositions such as the twentieth century motor court and motel design is also readily apparent.

Over 80 Virginia mineral springs have been identified. The defining features of a significant number of those landscapes are intact. Today, in a time of increased interest in heritage landscapes, healing landscapes, and tourism, they are an extraordinary resource for interpretation and rehabilitation. A Springs Tour again seems to be a possibility following the success of the recently developed automobile tours of Virginia's Civil War landscape: The Virginia Civil War Trails. The Trails' brochure includes five automobile tours including a Shenandoah Valley tour.<sup>20</sup> The landscape of the Shenandoah Valley Tour includes nearly all of the present day Virginia springs sites located west of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Extending the tour 30 miles to the south and west add all of the remaining significant spring sites. The expanded tour could easily be connected to the nearby West Virginia Springs Tour that includes Sweet, Salt Sulphur, Red Sulphur, White Sulphur, and Blue Sulphur Springs among others. The resultant tour would be a significant and meaningful overlay to the Civil War Trails tour. During the civil war many of the springs served as military hospitals. After the war the springs again served as retreats for the former aristocracy and southern military elite. Prominent among the spring's tour would be Yellow Sulphur Springs between Christiansburg and Blacksburg Virginia (fig. 10). Here Roderick Lewis has noted that "After the civil war quite a number of the prominent ex-soldiers would gather at the Yellow Sulphur Springs Resort. General Pierre Beauregard ...was often a summer guest. Another prominent guest was General Jubal Early."<sup>21</sup> Early and others meeting at Yellow Sulphur following the Civil War would reconstitute the Southern Historical Society and significantly influence the development of the social and physical landscape of the American south for the next century.

The Virginia Mineral Springs are a significant part of the story of a developing nation and the defining event of that young nation's history. They deserve to again take their

rightful place as Virginia landscapes of historical importance, regional and national influence, and economic potential.



Fig. 1. Natural Bridge, from Edward Beyer's Album of Virginia, 1857. Special Collections Department, University Libraries, Virginia Tech.



Fig. 2. Falling Springs, from Edward Beyer's Album of Virginia, 1857. Special Collections Department, University Libraries, Virginia Tech.



Fig. 3. Sweet Springs Hotel, Photo by author.



Fig. 4. Sweet Springs Cottage Row and Central Lawn, Photo by author.



Figure 5. Capon Springs, Photo by author.



Figure 6. Yellow Sulphur Springs Hotel, Photo by Author.



Figure 7. "Memphis Row", Yellow Sulphur Springs. Photo by author.



Figure 8. Fauquier White Sulphur Springs, from Edward Beyer's Album of Virginia, 1857. Special Collections Department, University Libraries, Virginia Tech.



Figure 9. Montgomery White Sulphur Springs, from Edward Beyer's Album of Virginia, 1857. Special Collections Department, University Libraries, Virginia Tech.



Figure 10. Yellow Sulphur Springs, Photo by author.

<sup>1</sup> John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Landscape in Sight: Looking at America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 148.

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- <sup>2</sup> Michael P. Branch and Daniel J. Philippon, eds. *The Height of Our Mountains: Nature Writing from Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains and Shenandoah Valley* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 93.
- <sup>3</sup> Carl Bridenbaugh, *Baths and Watering Places of Colonial America* (Williamsburg: Virginia, 1946), 160.
- <sup>4</sup> Bridenbaugh, *Baths and Watering Places*, 181.
- <sup>5</sup> Perceval Reniers, *The Springs of Virginia: Life Love and Death at the Waters 1775-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941), 26.
- <sup>6</sup> Will Sarvis, "Turnpike Tourism in Western Virginia, 1830-1860", *Virginia Cavalcade* (Winter 1999): 19.
- <sup>7</sup> William Burke *The Mineral Springs of Virginia*, Quoted in John W. Dumont, *Red Sulphur Springs Background Survey Report* (J.W. Dumont, 1987), 28.
- <sup>8</sup> Quoted in John W. Dumont, *Red Sulphur Springs Background Survey Report* (J.W. Dumont, 1987), 15.
- <sup>9</sup> Charlene Marie Lewis, "Ladies and Gentlemen on Display: Planter Society at the Virginia Springs, 1790-1860". (Ph. D. diss., University of Virginia, 1997), ii-iii.
- <sup>10</sup> Robert Conte, *The History of the Greenbrier, America's Resort* (Charleston, West Virginia: Pictorial Histories Publishing Co., 1989), 206.
- <sup>11</sup> Conte, *The History of the Greenbrier*, 202.
- <sup>12</sup> Lewis "Ladies and Gentlemen on Display", iii.
- <sup>13</sup> Charlene Marie Lewis, *Ladies and Gentleman on Display: Planter Society at the Virginia Springs, 1790-1860* (Charlottesville; University of Virginia Press, 2001), 130.
- <sup>14</sup> Charlene Marie Lewis, *Ladies and Gentleman on Display: Planter Society at the Virginia Springs, 1790-1860*, 148-9.
- <sup>15</sup> Henry W. Lawrence, "Southern Spas; Source of the American Resort Tradition". *Landscape*, vol.27, no. 2, (1983) p. 2.
- <sup>16</sup> Porte Crayon, "Virginia Illustrated", *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* no. LVII (Feb. 1855, vol. X), 80.
- <sup>17</sup> Porte Crayon, "Virginia Illustrated", 123.
- <sup>18</sup> Lawrence, "Southern Spas; Source of the American Resort Tradition", 11.
- <sup>19</sup> Lawrence, "Southern Spas; Source of the American Resort Tradition", 6.
- <sup>20</sup> See the Virginia Civil War Trails Brochure published by Virginia Civil War Trails, Richmond, Virginia 1997.
- <sup>21</sup> Roderick Lewis Lucas, *A Valley and Its People* (Blacksburg, Virginia; Southern Printing Company, 1975), 84.