

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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