

HISTORIC SPRING RESORTS AND THEIR LOST CULTURE IN ROCKBRIDGE COUNTY

By Erich Faber

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THE SPRING RESORTS of Virginia and Rockbridge County were primarily developed for health and for recreation. As their fame grew, the more fashionable and elaborate resorts attracted visitors from foreign countries as well as from all over the United States. Some spring resorts whose clientele consisted mainly of wealthy and socially prominent people, such as Rockbridge Alum Springs, were quite expensive. Others, such as Wilson Springs, appealed to more ordinary people, who would camp in cabins and sometimes even had to supply their own food and bedding.¹

The Virginia resorts were developed on the premise that the waters, no matter what type, could cure diseases at a time when medical science could not do much for some patients. People were attracted by advertising to drink from the waters and bathe in them, and the spring resorts prospered. Whether the waters actually cured anyone is problematical, but certainly the elevation of

the mountain resorts and the clean air helped. Two diseases then prevalent in the United States, yellow fever and cholera, likely helped prompt the rapid growth of the health spas, and if a person didn't need a cure, there was always the social appeal.²

Many factors contributed to the demise of the spring resorts over the years. One was the devastation of the Civil War and the subsequent changes in the social systems of the South. Another factor was the advancement of medical treatment, especially after about 1900. The automobile age also changed the fabric of American life in the early 1900s, enabling people to travel wherever they wanted.

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Above: Rockbridge Alum Springs in *Album of Virginia*, lithograph by Edward Beyer, 1858. Courtesy of the Library of Virginia.

And fire was a key cause of the demise of many resorts. Arson seemed to be the cause of many of these fires, undoubtedly reflecting the fragile financial condition of many resorts.³

The Waters and Perceived Medical Benefits

THE SPRING WATERS of the resorts of Rockbridge County were of two basic types. **Sulphur waters**, such as those at Cold Sulphur Springs, contain high concentrations of hydrogen sulfide and have a “rotten egg” smell. **Chalybeate waters**, such as those at Rockbridge Alum Springs, contain high concentrations of iron minerals. Both categories also vary in thermal

temperature and in lime and alum concentration.⁴

Not only the public but physicians believed that waters could cure many disorders such as bronchial or throat diseases, hemorrhages of the lungs, tubercular consumption, pulmonary affliction, dyspepsia, pneumonia, dysentery, skin diseases, ailments peculiar to females, gout, rheumatism, neuralgia, paralysis, diseases of the blood and urinary organs, and many others. People believed so strongly in the healing capabilities, in fact, that many resorts bottled their water and exported it all over the United States to be sold at a high price.⁵

Almost every resort had a physician in residence who would prescribe the manner in which its healing water should be administered. One resident physician’s prescription, for example, stated:

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 in a brisk walk, drink again at 7, 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 horseback 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 to ten pins, quoits, 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.⁶

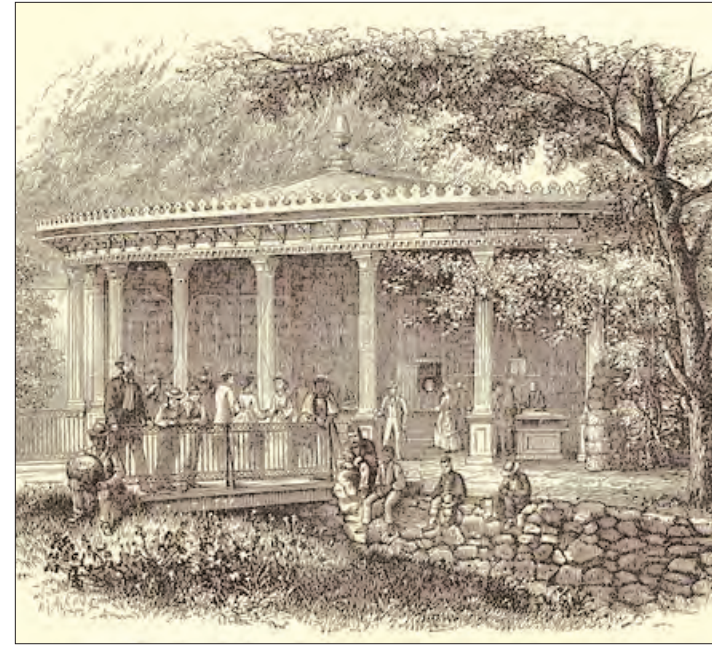
The same resident physician advised against “deep potations of mint julep and other spirituous mixtures, after coming from the bath.”

Rockbridge Alum Springs

ROCKBRIDGE ALUM SPRINGS is located west of Bratton’s Run, approximately thirteen miles west of Lexington. It was the largest resort in the county and gained international acclaim. Some said it was second only in fashion and elegance to White Sulphur Springs.⁷

The 2,000 acres on which the resort was located had been owned by the Campbell family since 1790. The resort was developed in the early 1830s, but a fire in 1840 destroyed most of the buildings. New construction resumed shortly thereafter. In 1852, John and William Frazier purchased the spa for \$150,000, an enormous sum of money at the time. It was considered to be the most valuable single piece of real estate in the South.⁸

Before the Civil War, Rockbridge Alum Springs could accommodate 600 to 800 guests. During the war it was used as a hospital. After the Civil War the resort merged with the adjacent Jordan Alum Springs and grew considerably in size. In 1885 a narrow-gauge railroad was built southward from Goshen, connecting the resort with the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad. For a few



Left: Rockbridge Alum Springs, from *The Southern States of North America*, 1875

Right: A promotional flyer for Rockbridge Alum. Note the crates of mineral waters at lower left awaiting shipment.



years after the Civil War, Rockbridge Alum Springs regained its pre-war elegance.⁹

After the Civil War and until his death, Robert E. Lee frequented Rockbridge Alum Springs. An account of a memorable visit by Lee in August 1866 has been preserved in the Washington and Lee University archives. The writer of this eyewitness account was B. A. Brauer, an eighteen-year-old slaughterhouse employee at the Alum. He wrote:

Lee was invited over by William Frazier, proprietor, to rest a few days. The southerners at the resort were very scarce. I suppose 90 percent of the people were northerners. I shall never forget the reception they gave General Lee. He rode down from Lexington on Traveller, and wore his uniform and had his knapsack on his back. The people at the Alum posted sentinels along the road to bring news of his coming, and as he turned the bend there was the biggest noise I ever heard. The guests swarmed around him cheering like mad, they pulled him off his horse and carried him to the hotel on their shoulders. The next day when I was at work, at the slaughter house, who should I see coming through the grounds but the greatest man in the United States. He stopped and we talked about Richmond for nearly an hour.¹⁰

It wasn’t long, however, until the resort fell on hard times. Social conditions changed drastically after the

Civil War, and by the early 1900s the automobile had changed people’s vacation habits, enabling them to travel more freely. The resort was sold at auction in 1909 for \$18,000. From 1909 to 1919 the Virginia Military institute conducted summer school at the springs, but the resort officially closed in 1919.^{11*}

Jordan Alum Springs

JORDAN ALUM SPRINGS, consisting of 500 acres adjoining Rockbridge Alum Springs, was operated by John W. Jordan, who in 1873 built a three-story hotel and detached cottages on the site. Each hotel room had an electric bell for calling the main office, and each floor had gas lights and a water closet.

Between 1872 and 1880 there was bitter litigation between the two resorts. A high fence was built between them. (The Jordan Springs advertisements of the day said a skilled gymnast could vault the fence.) Rockbridge Alum would not permit visits from Jordan Alum guests, while Jordan would not allow Rockbridge guests to attend its dances. Employees of the two resorts often engaged in fist fights.¹²

* Editor’s note: Since 1992, it has been operated as a camp by Young Life, a non-denominational Christian youth organization.



The Grand Hotel at Jordan Alum Springs in a drawing that was more elaborate than the real thing.

Sometime around 1880, however, the controversy was resolved and the two resorts merged to become the new Rockbridge Alum Springs.¹³ The fence was removed and a covered boardwalk was erected to connect the two hotels.



Gazebo at Jordan Alum Springs today. Photo by Arthur Bartenstein, from Architecture of Historic Rockbridge, Historic Lexington Foundation, 2015.

Cold Sulphur Springs

COLD SULPHUR SPRINGS is located two miles southwest of Goshen, near the intersection of state road 39, Maury River Road, and Brattons Run. It is one of the many fairly large resorts that have almost disappeared, not only physically but from the histories as well.

It was apparently a flourishing resort when James Leach purchased it in 1859. A. S. Goode was the proprietor in 1869 and a hotel was reported to have been built in 1872 by Mr. J. B. Goodloe. The hotel at Cold Sulphur Springs was a large, square, three-story frame building with accommodations for more than 250. In the hotel was a large dance hall where an orchestra played frequently for dances and concerts.” Behind the hotel were cottages that could accommodate whole families.¹⁴

Fire in 1908 resulted in the demise of Cold Sulphur Springs. The main hotel and many of the cottages burned to the ground, and the remaining buildings were reportedly gone by the 1920s.¹⁵ Today, part of the old resort is a campground, and the remains of the spring house can still be seen about a mile up an old dirt road from the campground. Close to the spring house are some foundation stones; what may have been a well for water can still be seen if one looks carefully. Nothing else remains.



Today, Cold Sulphuer Springs is a campground.

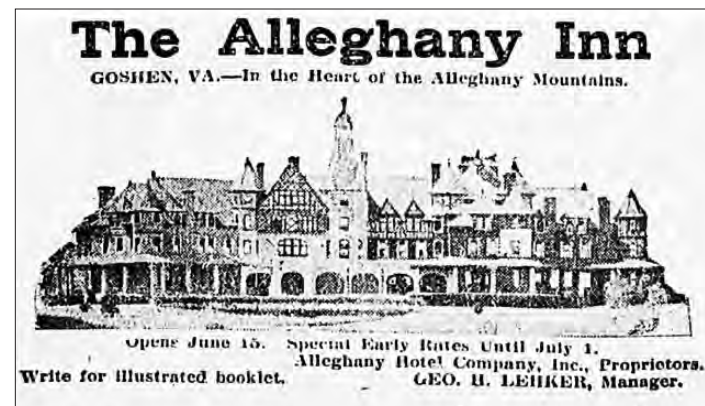
The Alleghany Hotel

THE ALLEGHANY HOTEL was located on top of a hill overlooking the main street of Goshen. The Alleghany was one of the most modern buildings of its time. It was erected in 1891 by the owner of the Cold Sulphur Springs. Although the Alleghany Hotel wasn’t actually a spring resort, its guests were encouraged to enjoy the Cold Sulphur’s spring waters. An advertisement of the time makes the point: “The Cold Sulphur Springs, supplying one of the best white Sulphur water in America is but one and a half miles from Goshen, and by special arrangement the water will be on draught at the Alleghany.”¹⁶

The Alleghany Hotel was designed by the famed architect Stanford White and cost \$215,000 to build. The huge storybook structure accommodated up to

500 people. A contemporary promotional pamphlet describes it this way: “The rotunda, drawing room [and] dining room are beautifully furnished with natural wood which excites the admiration of all visitors and it can be safely stated that this hotel has no superior in the United States.”¹⁷

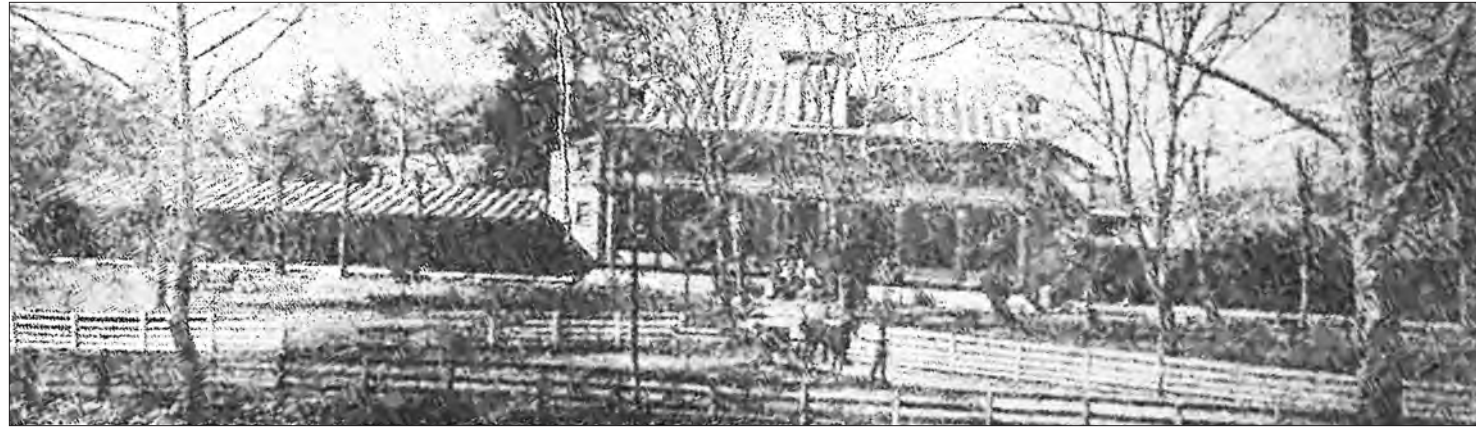
Fire was also the end of this magnificent hotel. The building was reduced to charred ruins sometime in the early 1920s; arson was suspected. Now all that remains of the once grand structure is a mess of snake-infested rocks and bricks.¹⁸



Advertisement in the Richmond Times-Dispatch, August 1915.



East view of the Alleghany Hotel from a postcard of indeterminate date.



The Rockbridge Baths Hotel, perhaps about 1875. This photograph was reprinted in the Lexington Gazette in 1951.

Rockbridge Baths

ROCKBRIDGE BATHS is located on state route 39, Maury River Road, midway between Lexington and Goshen. The waters contain iron and are rich in carbonic acid gas.¹⁹ A hotel accommodating 150 to 200 visitors was built there in 1857, and R. E. Lee and his wife, Mary Custis Lee, frequented the resort.

Its owner, Dr. Samuel Brown Morrison, had to give it up in 1900 because of illness, and when he left so did most of the patrons. A succession of owners followed, and in 1921 the Virginia Military institute took over the property and established a summer school.

In 1926 the hotel burned to the ground and was not rebuilt. VMI then closed the summer school and sold



The Wilson Springs community in a 1939 photograph by William D. Hoyt, from Washington and Lee University's Special Collections.

the property, but the swimming pool, part of the dance hall, and some cottages can still be seen.²⁰

Wilson Springs

WILSON SPRINGS is located on Maury River Road, state route 39, about two and a half miles west of Rockbridge Baths, thirteen miles northwest of Lexington. The spring itself is a sort of freak of nature: It rises on a tiny island in the middle of the Maury River, and a long footbridge of logs made the island accessible.¹²¹

William A. Wilson II bought the 465 acres of land in 1843. He built a hotel for seventy people as well as thirty cabins; in all, the facilities could accommodate 250 people.

Wilson Springs seems to have meant to attract the plain people of Rockbridge, as suggested by the number of cabins and shown in the following newspaper item:

These opening weeks of August find the season in full swing at Wilson Springs. The harvest is laid by and farmers and their families from all over the county with some friends from Lexington are gathered here in large numbers and making merry together. Every cabin on the green is occupied and some are staying at the Wilson house on the hill.²²

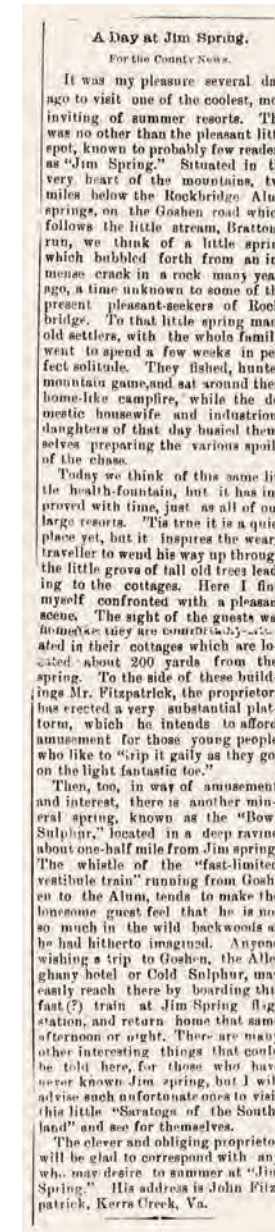
The resort apparently operated until around 1920.²³ Today the house is occupied by a Wilson descendent, and six of the cabins stand guard at the entrance to Goshen Pass. The rest were demolished when the Maury road was relocated.

Jim Spring

JIM SPRING is a Rockbridge County mystery. It is not mentioned in any of the books about spring resorts, and the only evidence of its existence is an old, yellowing shred of newspaper from the *Rockbridge County News* in the Washington and Lee University library archives. The article — apparently the only evidence of this seemingly once-great resort — is untitled, unsigned and undated, and the exact location of the spring resort it describes is unknown.*

It was my pleasure several days ago to visit one of the coolest, most inviting of summer resorts. This was no other than the pleasant little spot, known to probably few readers, as "Jim Spring." Situated in the very heart of the mountains, two miles below the Rockbridge Alum springs, on the Goshen road which follows the little stream, Bratton's run, we think of a little spring which bubbled forth from an immense crack in a rock many years ago, a time unknown to some of the present pleasant-seekers of Rockbridge. To that little spring many old settlers, with the whole family, went to spend a few weeks in perfect solitude. They fished, hunted mountain game, and sat around their home-like campfire, while the domestic housewife and industrious daughters of that day busied themselves preparing the various spoils of the chase.

Today we think of the same little health-fountain, but it has improved with time, just as all



of our large resorts. 'Tis true it is a quiet place yet, but it inspires the weary traveler to wend his way up through the little grove of tall old trees leading to the cottages. Here I find myself confronted with a pleasant scene. The sight of the guests was homelike; they are comfortably situated in their cottages which are located about 200 yards from the spring. To the side of these buildings Mr. Fitzpatrick, the proprietor, has erected a very substantial platform, which he intends to afford amusement for those young people who like to "trip it gaily as they go, on the light fantastic toe."

Then too, in way of amusement and interest, there is another mineral spring, known as the "Bowl Sulphur," located in a deep ravine about one half mile from Jim spring. The whistle of the "fast-limited vestibule train" running from Goshen to the Alum, tends to make the lonesome guest feel that he is not so much in the wild backwoods as he had hitherto imagined. Anyone wishing a trip to Goshen, the Alleghany hotel or Cold Sulphur, may easily reach there by boarding this fast (?) train at Jim Spring flag-station, and return home that same afternoon or night. There are many other interesting things that could be told here, for those who have never known Jim spring, but I will advise such unfortunate ones to visit this little "Saratoga of the Southland" and see for themselves.

The clever and obliging proprietor will be glad to correspond with any who may desire to summer at "Jim Spring." His address is John Fitzpatrick, Kerrs Creek, Va.²⁴

* Editor's note: Jym Springs [sic] Lane extends east from Brattons Run (county road 780) about two miles north of Rockbridge Alum Springs, but there is no obvious remnant of a resort.

Readers can find more in *The Architecture of Historic Rockbridge* by J. Daniel Pezzoni (Historic Lexington Foundation, 2015), especially Chapter 6, "Resorts."

ENDNOTES

1. Cohen, Stan: *Historic Springs of the Virginias*. Pictorial Histories Publishing Co., Missoula, Montana, 1981, p. viii.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Cohen, pp. vii, viii.
6. Ibid., p. 95.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. *Report on Alum Springs*. In Leyburn Library, Washington and Lee University, undated, pp. 12–13
11. Cohen, p. 96.
12. Cohen, p. 190
13. Ibid.
14. Allen, John T. III: *Lost Landmarks of Goshen*. McClure Printing Co., Verona, Virginia, 1959, p. 5
15. Cohen, p. 28.
16. Allen, p. 8.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Moorman, J. J.: *The Virginia Springs*. J. B. Lippincott, New York, 1859, p. 289.
20. Cohen, pp. 103, 121.
21. Ibid., p. 121.
22. Quoted in the *Rockbridge County News*, Golden Jubilee issue, 1946.
23. Cohen, p. 122.
24. *Rockbridge County News*, undated, “A Day at Jim Spring.” In the Margaret and Lucy Withrow Scrapbook collection, Washington and Lee University Library.

