

Berkeley Springs and Bath – history of the springs and their town

by Jeanne Mozier, local historian

The warm mineral springs that are the mark of Berkeley Springs' destiny as a spa town, run more than a mile deep and millennia long in the geology of the area. They emerge in a cluster at the base of a steep sandstone ridge in the narrow northern section of a valley seven miles south of the Potomac River. Enjoyed by tribal visitors for thousands of years, they are the waters George Washington called "fam'd warm springs."

In 18th century America, towns were founded around harbors, along rivers or gaps in the mountains, or at the intersection of major trails and roads, but not Berkeley Springs. It was settled and grew into a town because of its thermal springs. In this tiny mountain enclave, known around the world for its spas and art, life has always been about the water.

During the 1740s, the eastern edge of the Appalachians, including the area around the springs, was frontier country. Native tribes navigated the Potomac River and traveled the main north/south valley but they had no large settlements. They did know about the warm healing waters and passed that information on to early travelers -- mostly missionaries, explorers and adventurers. Permanent settlers' homes were limited to an occasional rough cabin along Sleepy Creek.

All the land in the region belonged to Thomas Lord Fairfax who was disinclined to sell it. As early as 1747, Fairfax was concerned about squatters on his land but indicated a willingness to set up a town around the springs to serve those who came to take the waters.

Although nothing official happened for nearly 30 years, a town of sorts organized itself around the springs by 1750. Notable early visitors like Charles Carroll and Horatio Gates were squatters, building summer cabins on land they did not own.

Originally, George Washington complained "lodging may be had on no terms but building them." During his later visits with his family in the 1760s, the Washingtons were able to stay in houses, including that of his friend James Mercer. They also spent time socializing with Lord Fairfax and his nephews who had cottages at the springs. There are historic reports of racetracks, gambling and houses of ill repute. Francis Asbury, America's first Methodist bishop, condemned

Berkeley Springs as "that seat of sin."

In 1776, the Virginia Legislature responded to a petition from more than 200 individuals who wanted a town around the springs. They established Bath, still the official name of the municipality. No matter what the law says, from 1772 to the present, the town area has been known to the world as Berkeley Springs, the name of its waters and its postal address.

A Victorian newspaper editor saw the area around the springs as not only having two names, Berkeley Springs and Bath, and two seasons, with and without visitors, but as two distinct places.

In the summer of 1777, more than 100 lots were laid out and sold at auction, the revenue going to Lord Fairfax who kept a spring and a few lots for himself and his nephews. George Washington purchased two lots and other colonial notables were sprinkled among the more than 70 original landowners.

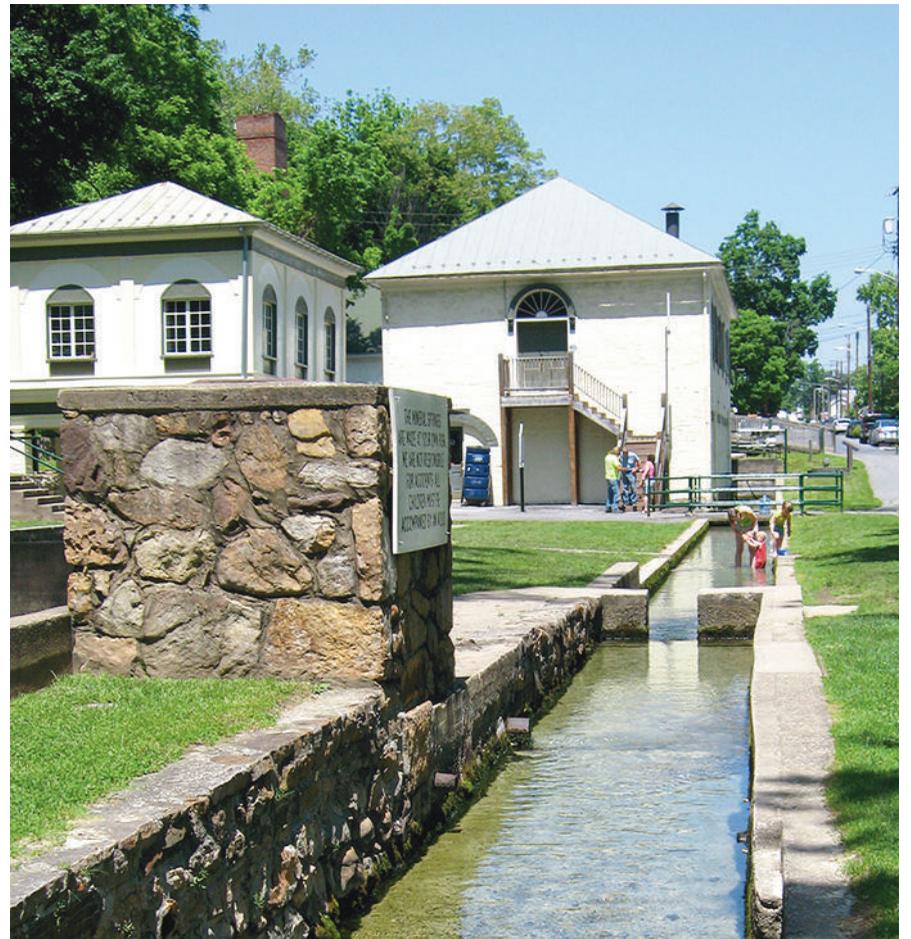
Several blocks around the springs and park have served as the commercial and official center of the area for more than two centuries. The main streets remain Fairfax and Washington, while others bear strikingly period names, including Congress, Independence, Union and Bath.

From the 1740s to the early twentieth century, Berkeley Springs was a popular summer resort with a small permanent population and mostly wood structures. Several times through the centuries, the smell of smoke and charred wood changed the course of commerce and compelled downtown redevelopment.

By 1880, many of the original town lots held summer cottages which were razed throughout the 20th century to construct modern residences, businesses and churches. Although Fairfax and Washington streets have long been commercial areas, most of the current structures date to a building boom in the early 20th century.

Geography still finds twin mountain ridges defining a north/south flow of activity. The Potomac River continues to mark the northern boundary of the county with its twists and turns. Washington's favorite overlook now includes highways, railroads, and four state instead of three, but the vista still features the bends of the Potomac and the cascading mountain tops of the Appalachians to the west.

The springs continue to flow at a steady rate and temperature on public



Berkeley Springs Park Run

land in the heart of town, although they are now owned and operated as Berkeley Springs State Park. Most of all, the people remain welcoming,

inventive and protective of their most precious resource – the water.

Excerpt from Historic Images of Berkeley Springs by Jeanne Mozier and Betty Lou Harmison

