

# Off the beaten path in Morgan County

by **Steve French**

Morgan County has many well-known popular attractions. For many years the Springs, Cacapon State Park, Prospect Peak and the Castle have been the bedrock of a thriving tourist industry. Here are some other interesting sites that deserve the attention of the curious local or visitor too.

## Trace of the Warm Springs Road

Today, many drivers traveling down on the ever-dangerous State Route 9 from Berkeley Springs to Hedgesville often lose their patience and religion. Yet, many years ago when it replaced the old, rocky Warm Springs Road, the people hailed its completion.



**Trace of the Warm Springs Road at Spruce Pine Hollow.**

From colonial times to well into the 1900's, the road, which ran from Alexandria, Va. to Bath, was an important area thoroughfare. Local relic hunters Richard "Pearly" Rankin and Tommy Swaim have found evidence that a portion of its original track through Morgan was just to the north of the modern road. Eventually, however, the more direct route through Spruce Pine Hollow came into use.

Among the road's many travelers included the famous, such as George and Martha Washington, who went Bath hoping to improve their health while relaxing in its celebrated warm waters. Other more notorious characters, such as gambler and libertine Major Robert Bailey, also followed this route into town.

During the Civil War, armies marched along it frequently. One of the best descriptions of the road comes from the pen of Sgt. George Neese, a

Rebel diarist who in his journal entry for Jan 4, 1862 recorded that day's travel from Spruce Pine Hollow to Bath. He remarked, "We crossed... a rough, steep road. In some places it meandered through deep and wooded ravines, and at others it wound along the side of steep, rocky ridges like a large serpent..."

Today, in many places both roads follow the same track, but at other points, the builders of the modern highway used heavy equipment to cut a shorter and safer way. As a result, some traces of the Warm Springs Road still exist, and with a little detective work, one can easily find abandoned stretches of the old route.

## Cherry Run Ferry & Ford

From Indian times until the early 1800's, the best way to get from Cherry Run to Maryland was the ford at the mouth of the stream. Sited about a half-mile downriver from the village, it has some historical significance. According to Native American authority Roger Schwartz, the shallow crossing was part of an important Indian trail that ran from Pa. to N. C.

Early travelers and many Civil War soldiers mentioned it in their letters, diaries and memoirs. For example, celebrated Rebel cavalryman Harry Gilmor begins his classic book, *Four Years in the Saddle*, with the line, "I crossed the Potomac at the mouth of Cherry Run on August 30, 1861."

When the ferry, located at the present-day boat ramp, started its operation, travelers now had a choice. But if they wanted to remain dry while enjoying a smooth voyage across the river, it would cost them a small fee. Once on the far side, a road led to a large culvert that permitted passage

under the C&O Canal to Big Pool.

Except for high water, raging floods, and rare periods of thick ice the ferry passengers could cross from dawn-to-dusk. One time, it even helped to transport an army from Md. to W.Va.

On July 15-16, 1863, Gen. B. F. Kelley used the ferry and an assortment of smaller boats to get his 8,000 soldiers over to Cherry Run. Hoping to corner some of Robert E. Lee's troops just back from Gettysburg and resting in the lower-Shenandoah Valley, he led his men to Hedgesville. Five days later, however, the Confederates turned the tables and chased him across Cherry Run ford.

The ferry survived the terrible Mar.1936 flood but eventually went out of business in 1942. Charles C. "Benny" French was Cherry Run's last ferryman.

## Sir John's Run

In my opinion, the village of Sir John's Run is among Morgan's most interesting places to see. Named for Sir John Sinclair, quartermaster for British General Edward Braddock's ill-fated 1755 expedition against Fort Duquense, it has a rich history.

Just across Warm Springs Ridge from Bath, the small rail town, situated along the run and in the narrow floodplain between the river and steep bluffs, is some five miles upstream from Hancock. Not only has it been the site of inventor James Rumsey's first exhibition of his "mechanical boat" but Civil War fights, a spectacular train wreck, and destructive floods have occurred there as well.

Sometime in the summer of 1785, Rumsey demonstrated the forerunner of his steamboat there. According to

the Museum of the Berkeley Springs, on "June 27, 1938, local historian Anita Buchanan Speers christened the spot on the Potomac where Sir John's Run enters the Potomac as Port James Rumsey."

On the frigid evening of Jan. 4, 1861, many bluecoats escaping Stonewall Jackson's attack on Berkeley Springs managed to reach the village and hold the Rebels off long enough to escape across the nearby ford. Also, throughout the war various Union commanders charged with guarding the 54-mile stretch of the B&O between Back Creek Bridge and the South Branch Bridge had their headquarters there.

On the afternoon of April 29, 1933, there was a breathtaking freight train derailment, just east of town. *The Washington, D.C. Evening Star* reported a number of casualties among the fifty hobos "riding the rails," including two African-American killed.

Sir John's Run native and former WWII combat veteran Wallace Hill, was around six years old at the time. Years ago, Mr. Hill told me that he was just starting to go up the steps into his home when he heard a terrific crash, spun around and saw people running everywhere.

The town's greatest disaster came in 1936. On March 22, *The Star* reported that Emergency Flood Committee chairman Ward Dawson, had listed Sir John's Run as having "half a dozen buildings dislocated, railroad tracks submerged, families making homes in churches and schools, railroad tower overturned."

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**Captain Benny French runs the Cherry Run Ferry across the Potomac River along with his wife.** photo courtesy of Tex Hessler



**Visitors to Berkeley Springs arrived at the train station at Sir John's Run.**