



KENNY KEMP | Gazette-Mail photos

A board fence and an American flag frame the restored Blue Sulphur Springs Pavilion near the roadside access point to the historic structure. Find more photos of the restoration on [Pages 6A and 3D](#). See a photo gallery of the whole project at www.wvgazette.com.

A SPA GETS TLC

Blue Sulphur pavilion set for another 190-plus years

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ALDERSON — In the green, rolling hills of Greenbrier County, far from a major highway and in the middle of a narrow, grassy valley enclosed by steep, wooded slopes, stands a sight that, for nearly two centuries, has given travelers cause to pause and ponder:

“Architecture, at least in America, rarely gets more poignant and evocative than it does here,” architectural historian S. Allen Chambers Jr. wrote in describing the scene in “Archipedia,” the Society of Architectural Historians’ peer-reviewed encyclopedia of significant American structures.

“A Doric temple, archaic in its proportions and sparse detail, stands isolated in the pasture, its 12 plastered brick columns supporting a frame entablature and hipped roof, with a tiny gable at the center of each side,” Chambers continued.

The sight could leave visitors wondering, “Is this West Virginia or ancient Greece?”



Margaret Hambrick of the Greenbrier Historical Society recounts the 10-year effort to stabilize and restore the pavilion.

Chambers wrote, before explaining that the structure is the “sole remnant of Blue Sulphur Springs, one of antebellum Virginia’s most popular and extensive spas.”

Once in danger of collapse, the huge open-sided pavilion covering the mineral water font at the former Blue Sulphur Springs resort has been restored, thanks to

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a 10-year effort spearheaded by the Greenbrier Historical Society and its Friends of the Blue Committee.

“We were just so lucky to have so many people so enthusiastically involved in the pavilion’s restoration,” said Margaret Hambrick, a member of both the historical society and Friends of the Blue. Had the restoration process not gotten underway when it did, she said, “it may well have been beyond repair by now.”

Built in 1833 and 1834, and opened in 1835 under the proprietorship of George Washington Buster, a former

SEE **PAVILION, 6A**

PAVILION

FROM PAGE 1A

Kanawha County sheriff, Blue Sulphur Springs resort was a three-story, 200-room hotel, with associated cottages, that spanned the width of the valley. According to early advertisements, its iridescent blue waters were said to cure a variety of colorful maladies, including “yellow fever, white swelling, blue devils, black plague, gout, colic and hydrophobia.”

The hotel, with its 100-foot-long, 30-foot-wide dining room and two large parlors, housed such luminaries as the nation’s seventh and eighth presidents, Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren, respectively, as well as Kentucky Congressman and U.S. Secretary of State Henry Clay, and Robert E. Lee during his time as a U.S. Army officer.

The pavilion might have been designed by a frequent guest at the resort, John H.B. Latrobe, a son of Benjamin Henry Latrobe, architect of the U.S. Capitol. The younger Latrobe, an engineer by profession, also dabbled in architecture and, among other projects, designed a row of Greek Revival cottages at the then-new resort at nearby White Sulphur Springs. He is said to have left a drawing of what he envisioned for the Blue Sulphur pavilion during a stay at the resort.

Dr. Alexis Martin became affiliated with the resort in 1835 and soon began offering hot mineral water baths, as well as steam vapor treatments and the nation’s first therapeutic mud baths, in a detached brick bathhouse.

Meanwhile, in 1838, the resort’s signature spring pavilion, with its distinctive 12 Doric columns and unique roof, was built.

Blue Sulphur, a getaway for the wealthy seeking to escape the summer heat in cities in the lowlands of Virginia, the Carolinas and points as far south as New Orleans, also was a popular destination for matchmaking parents, according to Hambrick. The resort offered marriage-aged children vacationing with their parents the chance to meet potential spouses from similar backgrounds in a romantic setting, while giving their parents the opportunity to monitor courtship activities.

While the resort flourished during its early years of operation, by the 1850s, its clientele had begun to dwindle because of its remote location, a stagnating national economy and competition from the spa at White Sulphur Springs, which was then building a large hotel of its own.



Margaret Hambrick, of the Greenbrier Historical Society, is dwarfed by the restored pavilion’s columns and roof.

In 1859, the resort at Blue Sulphur Springs was closed and sold to the Western Virginia Baptist Association, which converted it into Allegheny College, an institution dedicated to “preparing young men for the University of Virginia, for professional study, or for the business of life.”

But the college collapsed with the arrival of the Civil War, during which soldiers from both sides occupied the campus as an outpost or hospital.

During fall 1861, Gen. Robert E. Lee returned to the former resort to visit ailing soldiers in a makeshift hospital. In the winter of 1862-63, 89 Confederate soldiers from Georgia who had been camped at the former resort died from exposure and disease and were buried on a nearby hillside.

In 1864, Union soldiers who arrived on the proper-



A historical marker lets visitors know they have arrived at the site of the Blue Sulphur Springs Pavilion in rural Greenbrier County.

ty were told by local residents that Thurmond’s Rangers, a company of Confederate partisans, had recently occupied the former resort. After finding some Confederate uniforms and graffiti inside a building, the leader of the federal force, Lt. Harrison Grey Otis, ordered his troops to torch the two largest buildings, but

spared the pavilion towering over the mineral spring.

After the war, Otis, a native of Ohio, moved to California, where he served as editor and, later, owner, of the Los Angeles Times. The newspaper remained in his family’s ownership for more than 100 years.

By 1920, the grounds of the former resort, then

owned by the heirs of George Washington Buster, became the site of Greenbrier County’s first 4-H camp. Later that year, the Buster heirs removed the roof of the spring’s pavilion and replaced it with another, and renovated several of its support pillars.

In 1954, Bernard H. Buster sold a 30-acre tract encompassing the Blue Sulphur Spring to Lewis Fleshman, who, in turn, bequeathed the land to his daughter, Rebecca Fleshman Lineberry.

In 2013, the year the structure was named to the Preservation Alliance of West Virginia’s Endangered Properties List, Lineberry donated the pavilion and the two acres immediately surrounding it to the Greenbrier Historical Society to accommodate the restoration of the landmark.

In 2014, the State Histor-

ic Preservation Office provided funding, with help from a matching grant from the Greenbrier County Commission, for structural and archeological reports, conducted by the Morgantown-based Mills Group.

The following year, a Kickstarter campaign raised more than \$25,000 and the Mills Group was hired to design future work on the pavilion. Also, a geological survey was commissioned to determine the distance to bedrock and the condition of soil at the pavilion site.

In 2016, Allegheny Restoration was awarded a contract to conduct stabilization, drainage and column work. The columns were repointed and wrapped, a new drain was installed from the spring box to nearby Kitchen Creek, and a leaning column was straightened.

In 2019, a grant from the State Historic Preservation Office was used to help restore and reinforce the pavilion’s foundation, replace the foundation’s face bricks and cap rocks, excavate the swampy ground under the pavilion, and cover it with gravel.

Last year, Schleiff Construction of Lewisburg was awarded a contract to build a new roof mimicking the 1838 original, coat the brick columns in stucco, and build a new brick floor around the spring to replicate the original. Last month, a dedication ceremony for the restored pavilion was held at the site.

“We still need some drainage work on the land surrounding the pavilion, and when that’s complete, historic signage will be installed,” Hambrick said. “Other than that, the restoration work is complete.”

A pedestrian gate has been installed along Blue Sulphur Springs Road (State Secondary Route 25) to provide public access to the pavilion.

For larger gatherings, like weddings and family reunions, the pavilion, which has been equipped with a discreet electrical outlet, may be rented through arrangement with the Greenbrier Historical Society.

“We’ve had one wedding here already,” said Hambrick. “It’s a great place for family friendly activities.”

For its 10-year effort to stabilize and restore the pavilion, the Greenbrier Historical Society’s Friends of the Blue Committee received this year’s “Best Save of an Endangered Property” award from the Preservation Alliance of West Virginia.

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A 33-foot-square brick floor surrounds a steel grate cover the spring that once drew thousands of visitors to the Blue Sulphur Springs resort during its heyday in the mid-1800s.

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