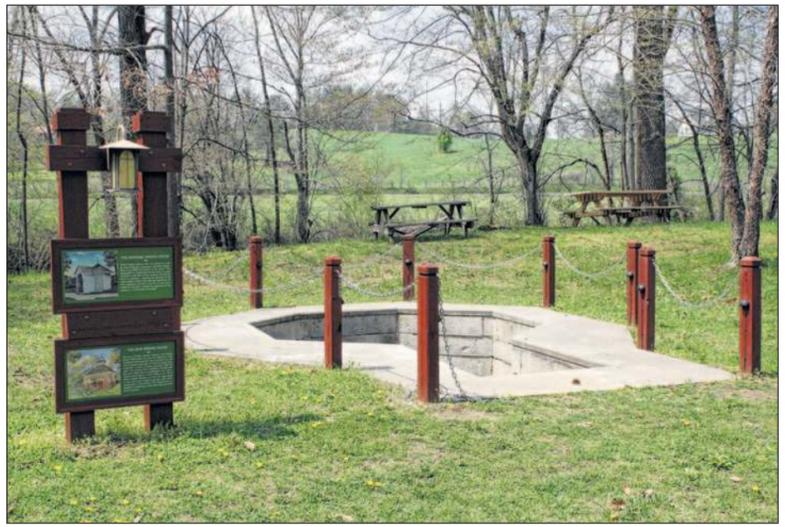




Photos by Jessica Johnson | The News  
A winding path leads White Sulphur Springs' visitors along the 7.5 acre lawn, which borders the Ararat River.



Access to the mineral springs at White Sulphur Springs is provided for anyone who would like to partake of its waters, said Robertson, which are reported to be high in beneficial minerals. A future spring house will cover the site.

# Historic White Sulphur Springs property takes on new life

**Jessica Johnson**  
Staff reporter

If the large, old trees scattered across the lawn of White Sulphur Springs could talk, they would tell stories of travelers who once arrived by train, dressed in their finest attire, enjoying the pleasures of summer resort on the river: elaborate luncheons on the front lawn, live music from the symphony mixing with the sounds of the river, dance parties in the pavilion that went on into the early hours of the morning, groups of ladies and gentlemen playing croquet and other lawn games, tables with guests enjoying card games in the shade, artists inspired by the surroundings, painting in the French tradition: en plein air.

Today, White Sulphur Springs, located off Riverside Drive in Mount Airy, offers a more peaceful and relaxed way of life that offers guests and residents a retreat from the ordinary.

The 145-acre site offers vacation rental cabins, secluded home sites, a trail system, and plenty of open lawn space for recreation, as well as access to the Ararat River which flows through the property. Eco-friendly rental cabins perch on a hillside amongst the trees, purposefully making as little impact as possible on the land, a concerted effort to preserve the natural spirit of the property. Home sites are available, with arts and crafts style home designs built with environmentally-friendly and many local products, homes designed to give just enough space without overwhelming the site.

There are homesites and cabins without grass to mow, encouraging owners to take a walk down to the expansive seven-and-a-half acre green lawn, framed by pathways offering strolls by the Ararat River and scattered with large, old trees.

Burke Robertson, the owner of White Sulphur Springs since 2005, is proud of his property and said he is "excited to share our vision for small-town living in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains."

"White Sulphur Springs is an environmentally sensitive retreat where residents enjoy life at a simplified, leisurely pace," described Robertson.

Robertson said he believes many people come to this area for its association with Mayberry, but when they leave many have fallen in love with Mount Airy. "We have people who come here for a day trip, they see what we have to offer and they may return for an overnight or weekend visit. We want them to spend longer time here — why not spend the rest of your life here? That is what we want to offer. The economic impact of people moving to this area is huge."

Signs posted throughout the property invite guests to "Taste the simpler life," which is the theme for White Sulphur Springs.

Winding pathways lead guests and future residents throughout the property, by the riverside and through the trees. Two hammocks in the grass swing from their frames in the shade of a tree. Dappled sunlight is filtered through tree branches and glistening on river water. A solitary chair perched on the river bank invites the guest to sit and relax. The only sounds are bird's songs and the river flowing over rocks. Picnic tables await couples or families to enjoy a meal by the river. Paths down to the river provide perfect fishing or wading spots.

White Sulphur Springs feels like it is in the middle of nowhere, but it is only 3.5 miles from downtown Mount Airy.

Robertson has worked to ensure that the property is developed with "respect to nature and the environment as a primary goal."

"I know I may be biased, but it really is an unbelievable space," said Robertson.

Plans are in the works to replace the spring house with a covered structure; an artist's rendering is posted next to the springs.

## An environmentally-sensitive retreat

When developing the property, minimal trees were cut then chipped to create mulch for landscaping. Granite from the local quarry was used to create retaining walls.

The first project for Robertson was replacement of the bridge, which he described as a major, \$200,000 project. The bridge has 42-inch steel beams, none of which are visible to those passing by, in order to preserve the beauty and simplicity of the entrance to the property.

"Water is magical. When you cross that natural barrier, cross the river, you change your mindset. You cross the river and see the 7.5 acre lawn and grove of rhododendrons. You enter a new place...a unique retreat," described Robertson.

Robertson obtained a conservation easement for all land along the Ararat River and the exterior boundary of the property. Robertson said he has protective covenants covering the property to make sure the site is developed with conservation practices in mind.

The six recently-opened vacation cabins were constructed with minimal impact on the site, built on special pilings and with energy efficient practices and environmentally friendly materials such as heave insulation and tankless water heaters.

Plans for the property include multiple phases, explained Robertson. Phase 1 includes the cabins and a selection of home sites. Next spring, cottage-style homes will be constructed. Robertson said homeowners will have access to a complete "maintenance menu" in an effort to make life more simple with less maintenance.

"Since we started developing the property, the world has changed, and we must change with it...we still have the same general concept, but it was scaled back. It is now designed to be less expensive and have larger lots with less expansive homes."

At this time, plans for a hotel are on hold, until there is an extension of much-needed water and sewer services. In the future, Robertson would like to add town homes, condos, as well as the home sites and additional rental cabins.

## Mineral Springs

Robertson said the mineral springs on the property were "extensively tested." Results from the tests revealed high contents of magnesium, calcium, and sulphur. Robertson said the sulphur smell disappears after the bottles of collected water are left uncapped overnight.

Individuals from outside of this area regularly travel to White Sulphur Springs to bottle the mineral water from the springs, which are available from a pipe at the bottom of a granite structure. Robertson said he sees at least two people per week collecting water from the springs in one-gallon to five-gallon jugs.

The springs were remodeled in 1991 with a springbox installed by a former owner. Robertson said the granite spring structure was hand-carved on site with hand cut corner pieces.



Cabins in the trees line the hillside overlooking White Sulphur Spring's front lawn. Remnants of the walls of the old hotel on the property are still visible at the base of the hill.

## A history of White Sulphur Springs

White Sulphur Springs, located off of Riverside Drive, has a long history as a summer resort, dating back from the late 1800s. The property was labeled as a race track on a map of 1700s land grants, according to a column written by the late Ruth Minick, a local historian and columnist for The Mount Airy News.

"This is the history of Mount Airy, right here," said Robertson, in reference to his property. "The railroad was essential to the growth of this area, as well as the growth of White Sulphur Springs."

A resolution passed by the General Assembly of North Carolina on March 12, 1877 passed "an act for the encouragement of the watering place at White Sulphur Springs in Surry County, North Carolina" which allowed the proprietors of the resort to operate.

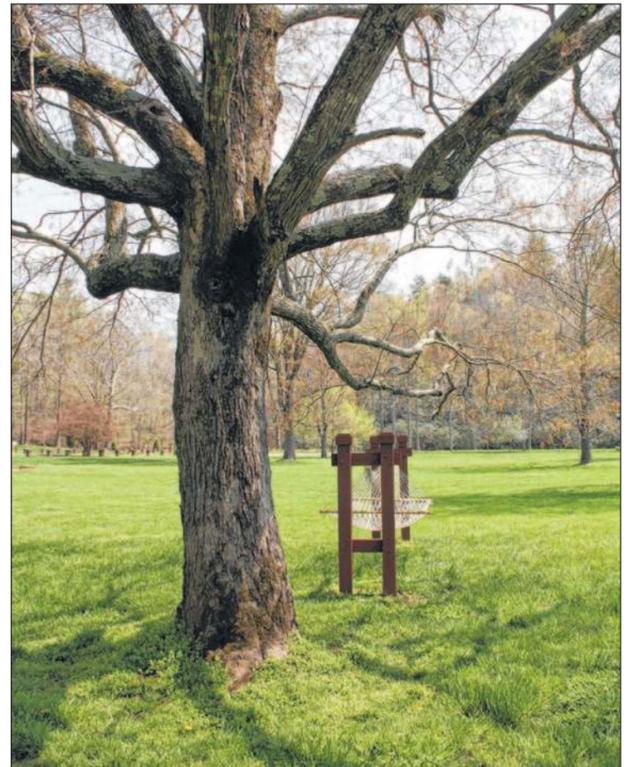
The possibility of home sites on the property were discussed as far back as a May 20, 1926 article of The Mount Airy News, which described a group of stock holders who had invested in the property and met several times to finalize remodeling of hotel, the grounds, and a golf course on the front lawn. Future plans at that time were considered as well: a proposed 50-acre lake, several smaller ponds, a swimming pool, and a dancing pavilion. The dancing pavilion was built, as long as a small golf course which contained 9 holes. It was referred to as "Mount Airy's master suburb in the making."

A laurel root gazebo once sat on the bank of the river, a larger version of the gazebo that still stands on the property of the William Alfred Moore House near downtown Mount Airy, which is the earliest-known structure still standing within the city limits.

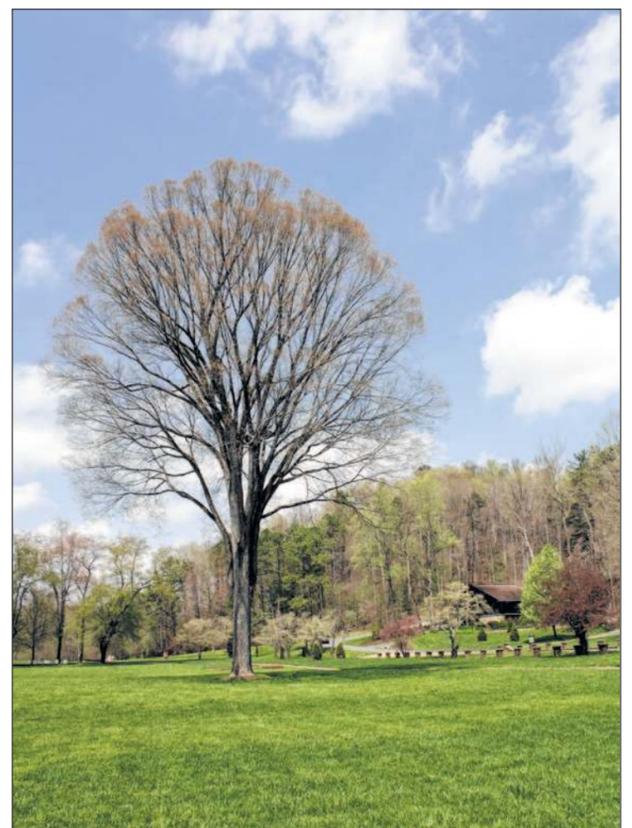
The property once contained a large three-story hotel with four-story towers on each end and in the middle, which replaced an earlier collection of separate buildings.

When White Sulphur Springs stopped operating in the 1940s, a recommendation was made from the state that it would be a great location for a "state alcoholic rehabilitation hospital," according to the July 1, 1949 edition of The Mount Airy News: "no better spot could be found than White Sulphur Springs for beauty and health."

On December 14, 1997, Minick wrote about the railroad bringing visitors to the area, including those who traveled to White Sulphur Springs from surrounding areas, who would board a narrow-gauge extension of the main railroad that was referred to as the "Dinky"



Hammocks awaits guests on the front lawn of White Sulphur Springs.



The expansive front lawn of the property is intended to be the main gathering spot for guests, in place of traditional lawns at the site of each home.

railroad, which made a stop at White Sulphur Springs on the way to Kibler Valley in Virginia.

Minick, in July of 1995, reported events that took place at White Sulphur Springs from July to September of 1895: "it was advertised far and wide as a

prime summer resort with excellent food, first rate hotels, cool mountain breezes, wonderfully cool nights, unsurpassed scenery — all were given their place in the sun."

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