

Hot Springs National Park

A Brief History of the Park



by Sharon Shugart
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HOT SPRINGS NATIONAL PARK: A BRIEF HISTORY

The area now known as "Hot Springs National Park" first became United States territory in 1803 as part of the Louisiana Purchase. The first permanent settlers to reach the Hot Springs area in 1807 were quick to realize the springs' potential as a health resort. By the 1830s, log cabins and a store had been built to meet the needs (albeit in a rudimentary way) of visitors to the springs.



Hot Springs in 1832

To protect this unique national resource and preserve it for the use of the public, the Arkansas Territorial Legislature had requested in 1820 that the springs and adjoining mountains be set aside as a federal reservation (not to be confused with the Indian reservations being established around the same time). On April 20, 1832, President Andrew Jackson signed legislation to set aside "...four sections of land including said

(hot) springs, reserved for the future disposal of the United States (which) shall not be entered, located, or appropriated, for any other purpose whatsoever." This makes Hot Springs National Park the oldest national park among current N. P. S. parks, predating



Yellowstone National Park by forty years. Unfortunately, Congress failed to pass any

and people continued to settle there, building businesses around and over the springs.



The site of Fordyce Bathhouse after the 1878 fire



The creek arch under construction: the junction of Whittington and Hot Springs Creek

In the short period after the fire, the government established stringent standards for bathhouse construction, and the area rapidly changed from a rough frontier town to an elegant spa city. Building, landscaping, and engineering projects proceeded apace. In 1882-83 the government enclosed Hot Springs creek in an underground arch for flood and sewerage control. The arch was then covered with earth, and the area above it was landscaped to create a pleasing park bounded with Lombardy poplars. The new

Victorian bathhouses built between 1880 and 1888 were larger and more luxurious than could have been dreamed of ten years earlier. The haphazardly placed wooden troughs carrying the thermal water down the mountainside were replaced with underground pipes. Roads and paths were improved for the convenience of visitors who wished to enjoy the scenery.



Bathhouse Row in 1889, after the covering of the creek arch
*(Photograph courtesy of the Kenna Collection, Culture Center of West Virginia.
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The Secretary of the Interior appointed U.S. Army Captain John R. Stevens to oversee a number of ambitious landscaping and building projects in the 1890s. The Secretary originally planned to retain Frederick Law Olmsted's personal landscaping services, but after a series of misunderstandings and mutual dissatisfaction, the

Olmsted firm withdrew. The Secretary then authorized Stevens to salvage what he could from the Olmsted firm's designs and complete other enhancements as he saw fit. The resulting improvements included a formal entrance, mountain drives, a lake park on Whittington Avenue, fountains, and a brick bathhouse for the indigent.

By 1901 all of the springs had been walled up and covered to protect them. Between 1912 and 1923 the wooden Victorian bathhouses built in the 1880s were gradually replaced with fire-resistant brick and stucco bathhouses, several of which featured marble walls, billiard rooms, gymnasiums, and stained glass windows. The final metamorphosis of Bathhouse Row was completed when the Lamar Bathhouse opened its doors for business in 1923. The bathhouses, all of which are still standing today, ushered in a new age of spa luxury.

On August 25, 1916, Congress established the National Park Service (39 Stat. 535), and Hot Springs Reservation came under its administration. Stephen T. Mather, head of the new organization, took a serious interest in the development of the site. His enthusiasm for Hot Springs apparently led to its designation as the eighteenth national park on March 4, 1921 (41 Stat. 1407). At the same time, the townspeople decided to call their city Hot Springs National Park as well.

The designation of the reservation as a national park ushered in the final phase of construction culminating in the Bathhouse Row of today. In 1922 the old Government Free Bathhouse was demolished, and a new state-of-the-art bathhouse opened on Reserve and Spring Streets. In 1933 a central thermal water collection and distribution system was completed, and grading began on the Grand Promenade behind Bathhouse Row. In 1936 the new administration building on the corner of Reserve and

Central opened, replacing the park headquarters earlier converted from the reservation's pump house. The Imperial Bathhouse next to the administration building was razed in 1937 to make way for the Grand Promenade entrance on Reserve, although it was to be 1958 before this ambitious project was completely finished. In the final phase of construction, the Fountain Street superintendent's residence was razed, and the promenade was extended to Fountain Street.



Fountain Street superintendent's residence, 1893-1958

By the 1960s the bathing industry in the park and in the city had declined considerably. On Bathhouse Row, the eight grand bathhouses that had been thriving since their construction in the first three decades of the century suffered from the decline. The elegant Fordyce Bathhouse was the first to close, in 1962, followed by the Maurice, the Ozark, and the Hale in the 1970s. In 1984 the Quapaw (briefly

reincarnated as Health Services, Inc.) and the Superior closed. When the Lamar closed in 1985, it left only the Buckstaff still operating on Bathhouse Row.

Bathhouse Row and its environs were placed on the National Register of Historic Places on November 13, 1974. The desire to revitalize Bathhouse Row also led citizens to campaign for adaptive uses of the vacant buildings. The strongest concern was to save the most elegant bathhouse, the Fordyce, which was consequently adapted for use as a visitor center and museum. Today, nearly all the empty bathhouses are under consideration for adaptive renovation.

HALE BATHHOUSE

The present Hale Bathhouse is at least the fourth building to use this name, although the first Hale Bathhouse, built in 1854, was on a site south of the present building. It more than likely burned, along with most of the rest of the town, during the civil war. After the war ended, the second Hale House was constructed on the present site, with its bathhouse situated on the opposite side of the creek. Sometime before 1882 a Victorian style bathhouse was built on the site by William Nelson, who signed a water lease for the site in 1879 effective 16 December 1878 to 15 December 1883. Construction costs were only \$5,000. Excavation for this bathhouse was accomplished by blasting. According to Henry Hecox, a local citizen during that time, Nelson said, "there is no doubt about [there being danger of losing the springs by blasting] but as I have commenced I will finish". Supt. Hamblen apparently also thought the blasting was a danger but nevertheless did nothing to stop it. Hecox and others believed the blasting had decreased the flow of some springs and made others disappear entirely.



The "Old Hale" Bathhouse circa 1875

The present Hale Bathhouse is the oldest visible structure on Bathhouse Row. Most of the present structure was completed in 1892. A major 1914 remodel by the Little Rock architectural firm of George Mann and Eugene Stern significantly enlarged the red-brick building and modified its style to Classical Revival. It cost over \$50,000.

The present building has 12,000 square feet on the two main floors. The lobby arcade was used as a sunroom where guests could relax in rocking chairs. In 1917 one of the hot springs was captured in a tiled enclosure in the basement, which is still in place. This bathhouse also was connected with a thermal cave carved out of the mountainside and used as a “hot room” in the 1890s (it was rediscovered during a 1990s drainage project and is now a federally protected archeological site). In 1939 the building was redesigned in the Spanish-Revival style, and the brick was covered in stucco to look as it does today. The Hale closed on October 31, 1978.



Hale Bathhouse, 1889

(Photograph courtesy of the Kenna Collection, Culture Center of West Virginia. Do not reprint without permission.)

Hale
Bathhouse,
1892

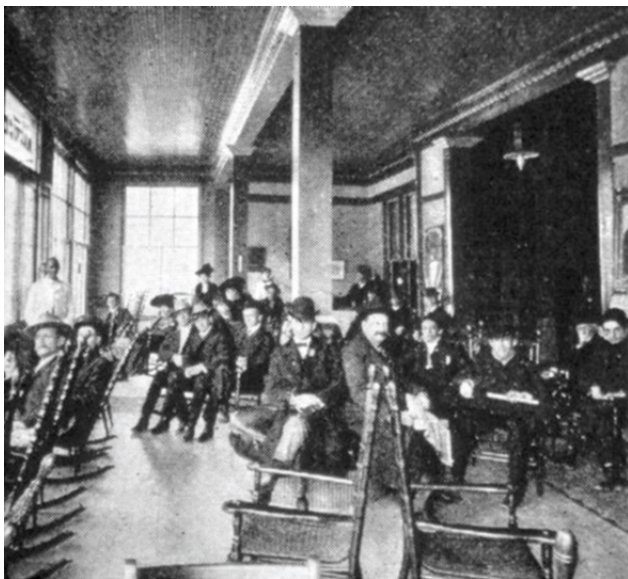


MAURICE BATHHOUSE

Designed by architect George Gleim, Jr., the present Maurice Bathhouse was built by William (Billy) Maurice to replace an existing Victorian-style building, the Independent Bathhouse, later renamed the Maurice Bathhouse after owner Charles Maurice.

The present building opened for business on January 1, 1912 and ushered in a new, more luxurious bathhouse milieu. The Maurice Bathhouse's architectural style is eclectic, but its major stylistic features are California Modern, as seen in the works of Louis Mullgardt and others in the Bay Region School.

When Sam W. Fordyce completed his bathhouse in 1915, Maurice hired the architects of the Fordyce Bathhouse, Mann and Stern of Little Rock, to renovate the Maurice. He purchased large stained glass skylights from the Rossbach



Art Glass Company in Columbus, Ohio (later of Chicago), along with hand-painted canvas wall coverings. To the third floor he added a striking Craftsman style den complete with stained glass ceiling and a frieze entitled "Dutch Life" hand-painted by artist Frederick Wernicke. The room was dubbed the "Roycroft Den" to commemorate Maurice's friend Elbart Hubbard, founder of the Roycrofters craftsman design studio, who died when the *Lusitania* was torpedoed in 1914. Hubbard published a booklet from his "Little Journey" series on the Maurice Bathhouse.

With a total floor space of 23,000 square feet,

Sun Porch, First Maurice Bathhouse the three-story bathhouse had ample room for a complete range of services and amenities. The interior boasted a lobby lined with gilded oak pilasters with ionic capitals, large stained glass skylights in both bath halls and the



men's pack room, private staterooms furnished with Mission Style oak pieces, and of course the Roycroft Den with its a stone hearth, stained glass clerestory, and plaster Bacchus mascarons. The Maurice also had a gymnasium, staterooms, a roof garden, and in the 1930s a therapeutic pool, situated in the basement. It was the only bathhouse on the Row to have such a pool. The Maurice closed in November 1974.

Plaster Bacchus mascarons from Roycroft Den



Maurice Bathhouse Art Glass Skylights



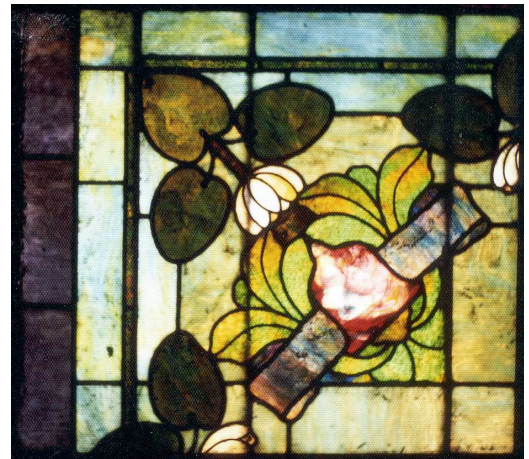
Men's Pack Room (lower panels not photographed)



Details from panel, above



Men's Bath Hall South End

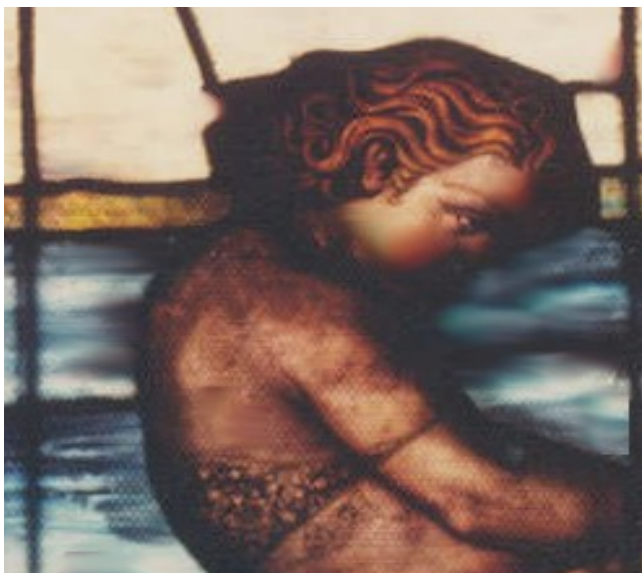


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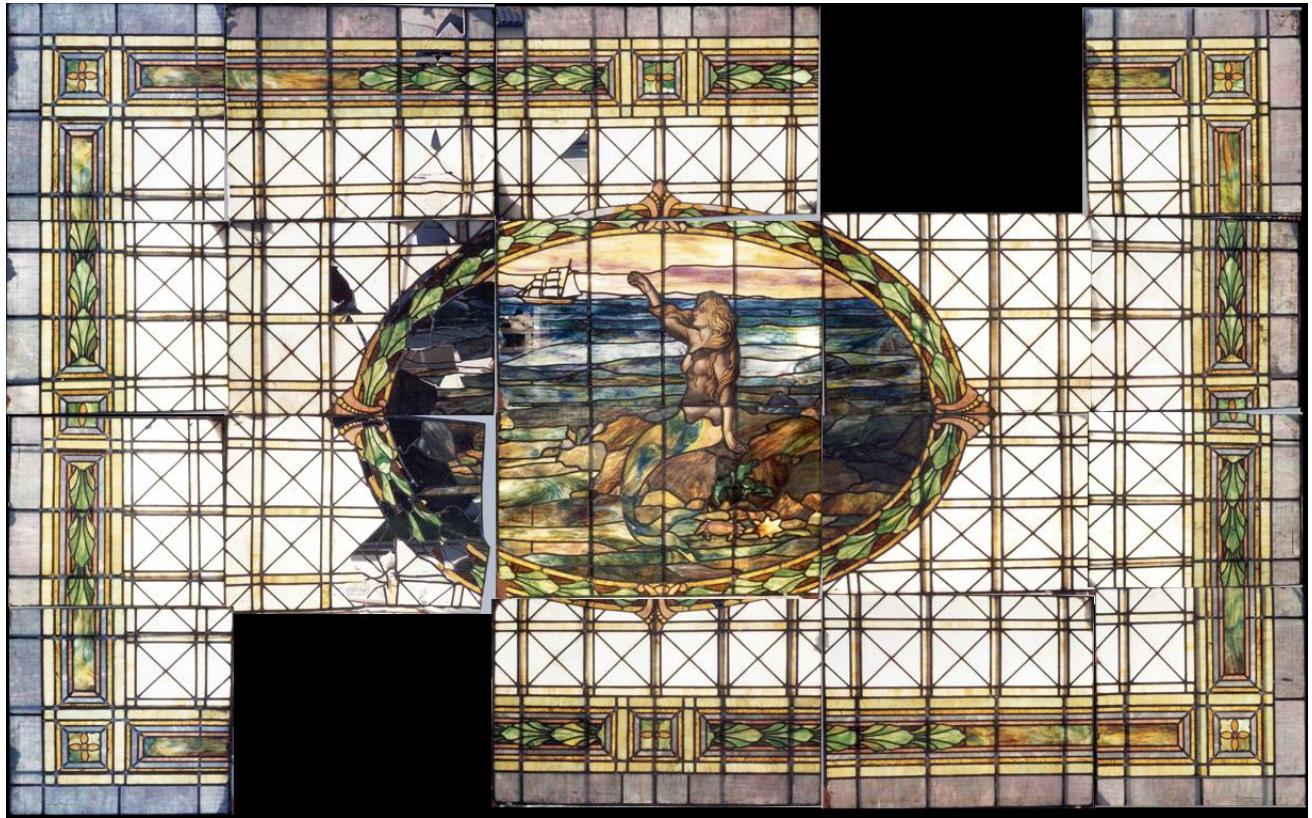




Men's Bath Hall North End



Details from panel, above



Women's Bath Hall (missing panels not photographed)

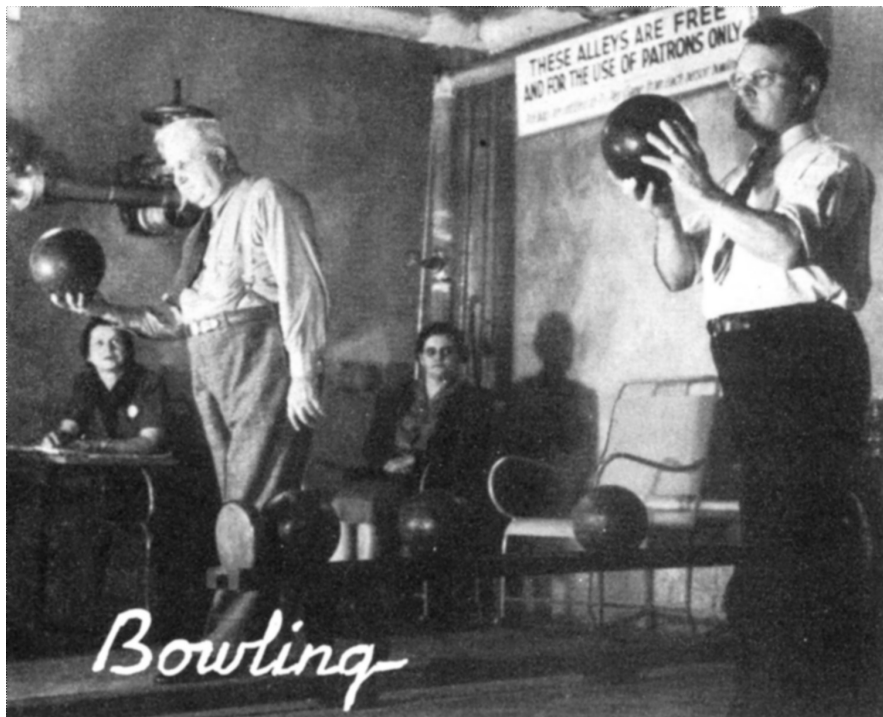
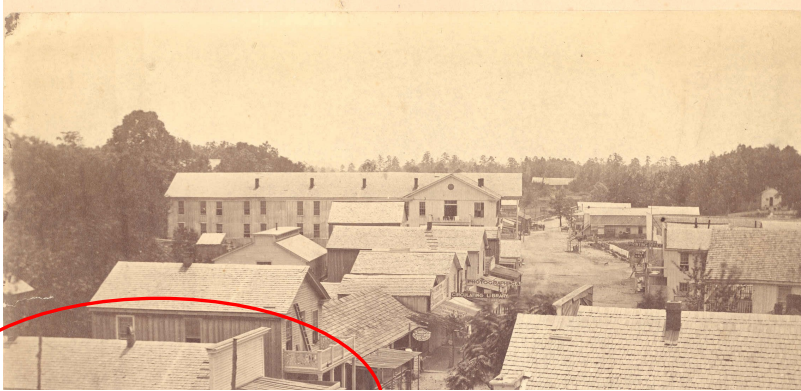


Details from panel, above



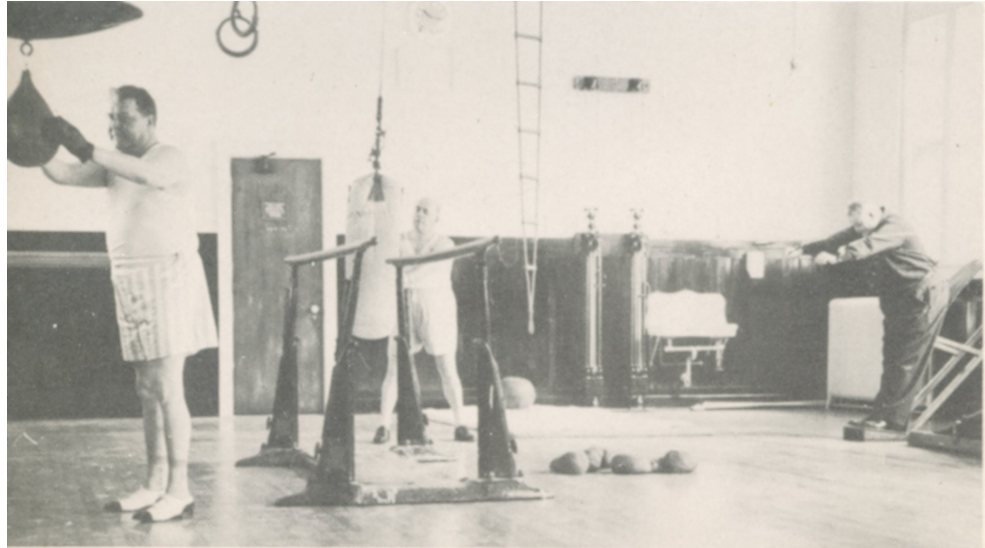
FORDYCE BATHHOUSE

The site of Fordyce Bathhouse was home to several bathhouses and shops. Staat's Bathhouse, also known as Bush and Fannin's Bathhouse, was typical of the wood frame bathhouses built in the years following the Civil War. A storefront on the west side of the creek but facing Valley Street offered geological samples and other goods for sale. The bathhouse was on the east side of the creek, accessible via footbridge. The buildings burned in 1878, and the site was subsequently awarded to Sam W. Fordyce et al for a new bathhouse. The Palace Hotel was erected on the site in 1880, and razed in 1914 to make way for yet another new bathhouse, the Fordyce.



Palace Bathhouse

men's parlor, iced thermal water, Zander exercise machines, a roof garden, and many other amenities. The Fordyce became the first bathhouse on the Row to go out of business when it suspended operations on June 30, 1962, but it was restored in 1989 and is now enjoying a renaissance as a historically furnished museum. It also functions as the park's visitor center.



The Fordyce gymnasium is the largest in the National Park and is at the disposal of those bathing at the Fordyce. This complete exercise center has all the necessary equipment for a good work out. The devices are especially designed for those patients who have to reeducate muscles and joints.

SUPERIOR BATHHOUSE



First Superior Bathhouse

*(Photograph courtesy of the Kenna Collection, Culture Center of West Virginia.
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The present Superior Bathhouse replaced a nineteenth century brick Victorian structure of the same name and opened on February 1, 1916. It was built by L. C. Young and Robert Proctor in the Classical Revival style, contained 11,000 square feet, and cost \$68,000 to build. Brick pilasters lend architectural interest to both the forward projecting sun porch and to the second



Pack room of present building, circa 1980



story portion of the main building. The vaguely Doric pilaster capitals are inset with a center medallion of green tile, as are the paterna over the pilasters. Both the sun porch and the second story portion of this bathhouse are topped with brick parapets. The smallest bathhouse on the Row, the Superior also had the lowest rates; it offered only the basic hydrotherapy, mercury, and massage services. The Superior closed in November of 1983.

Sitz bath, hydrotherapy room



Lobby , circa 1980

QUAPAW BATHHOUSE

The Quapaw Bathhouse was built in 1922 on two lots that were previously used for two Victorian style bathhouses (the Horseshoe and the Magnesia). Also designed by Mann and Stern, the building was originally to be named the Platt Bathhouse after one of the owners. However, when a tufa cavity was discovered during excavation, the owners decided to promote the cavity as an Indian cave, and the bathhouse was named Quapaw Bathhouse in honor of a local Native American tribe that briefly held the surrounding territory after the Louisiana Purchase was made.



Horseshoe Bathhouse

The most impressive exterior detail of this Spanish Revival bathhouse is its dome, inset with colored tile and topped with a decorative cupola. Its 24,000 square foot area mostly covers the first floor, but a second floor had additional dressing rooms and a lounge room in the center. Construction costs for the building totaled \$214,837. Its lease provided water for

forty tubs, making it the largest business for bathing, its main service. Although other services were not stressed at the Quapaw, it did offer massages and some electrotherapy. The Quapaw closed in 1968, but shortly afterward other bathhouse owners reopened it as Health Services, Inc. It was the only bathhouse on the Row to make services available on evenings and weekends when the other businesses were closed.

Shortly before its final closure in 1984, the bathhouse reclaimed its current and historic name.



Magnesia Bathhouse



Quapaw Bathhouse, men's cooling room



Quapaw Bathhouse, second floor men's lounge

OZARK BATHHOUSE

From the early 1870s to the great fire of 1878, the Weir and George Bathhouse occupied the site of the Ozark Bathhouse. This frame house, typical of the early bathhouses, probably would have fallen down due to decay if the fire hadn't destroyed it first.



The first Ozark Bathhouse derived its name from the surrounding mountain range then considered to be a part of the Ozark range but now known as the Ouachita Mountains. This elegant Victorian structure was roomy and comfortable, but it was also built of wood and subject to rotting and fire just as the earlier primitive bathhouses were. The present fire-resistant brick and stucco Ozark Bathhouse replaced the Victorian structure. Designed by architects Mann and Stern of Little Rock, the bathhouse was completed in the summer of 1922, just a few months after the Quapaw opened for business. Built at a cost of \$93,000 in the Spanish Revival style, the building is set between low towers whose

receding windows suggest the nascent Art Deco movement. The prominence of the towers was lessened during the 1942 renovation that brought the building's wings forward in line with the front porch, which was enclosed at the same time. The plaster-cast window boxes are unique on Bathhouse Row. The cartouches on both sides of the front are of the scroll and shield type with the center symbol described as The Tree of Health or The Tree of Life. Like the Quapaw, the Ozark was more impressive in its



First Ozark Bathhouse

exterior facade than in its interior appointments, with only 14,000 square feet and twenty-seven tubs. It catered to a middle economic class of bathers unwilling to pay for frills. The Ozark closed in 1977. A painted wooden porch enclosure was removed in the late 1990s to return the building to its original appearance.

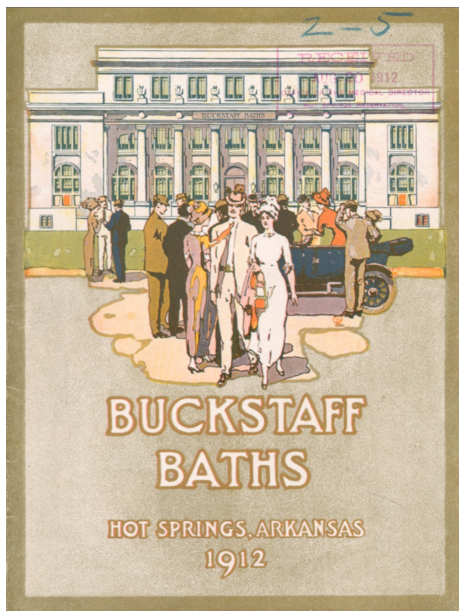


BUCKSTAFF BATHHOUSE



The Buckstaff Bathhouse replaced the former Rammelsberg Bathhouse, a brick Victorian structure. The Rammelsberg replaced another brick bathhouse destroyed in the 1878 fire. Designed by Frank W. Gibb and Company, Architects, the present bathhouse cost

\$125,000 to build and contains 27,000 square feet on three main floors. Classical in design, with imposing Doric columns and urns gracing the front of the building, the building is of taupe brick with white stucco and wood trim. It epitomizes the Edwardian style of classically designed buildings popular during the first decade of the 20th century. Because it has been in continuous operation since it opened on February 1, 1912, it is one of the best preserved of all of the bathhouses on Bathhouse Row. Colorado marble is used throughout the interior, particularly in the bath halls. The floors are of white and colored hexagonal tile in varying patterns. All levels may be accessed by way of stairs or the building's original elevator, with an ornate interior reminiscent of the Golden Age of Bathing. The capacity of the building is 1,000 bathers per day.



LAMAR BATHHOUSE

The Lamar Bathhouse building opened on April 16, 1923, replacing a wooden Victorian structure named in honor of the former U. S. Supreme Court Justice Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus Lamar who was Secretary of the Interior when the first bathhouse was built in 1888.



First Lamar Bathhouse, 1889

The present structure cost \$130,000 to build. The architectural design can best be described as the California School or (San Francisco) Bay Region School. The stone, brick, and stucco construction is moderately Spanish in flavor and coordinates well with the five bathhouses with Spanish motifs. The most distinctive exterior component is the sun porch with its windows of three sections and a wide center bay. The Lamar was unique in that it offered a range of tub lengths (5', 5'6", 5'9", 6', 6'6") for people of various heights. It also had a small coed gymnasium with another separate area for women adjacent to the gymnasium. The lobby, featuring a long counter of Tennessee marble, was the largest of the eight bathhouses on the Row. Murals and stenciling were added to the lobby and stairways sometime in the 1920s by Danish muralist W. L. Zelm for a European aura. In the mid-1940's, the interior halls and stairs were embellished with marble, ornamental iron balustrades, and silver glass interspersed with red panel wainscots. The Lamar closed November 30, 1985.

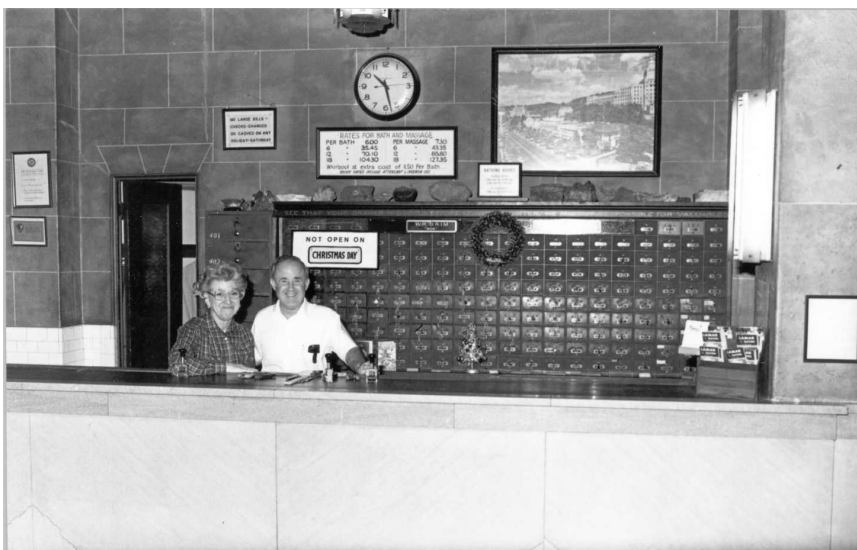
Interior views of Second Lamar Bathhouse



Women's dressing stalls



Sun porch



Information desk



Second floor dressing room

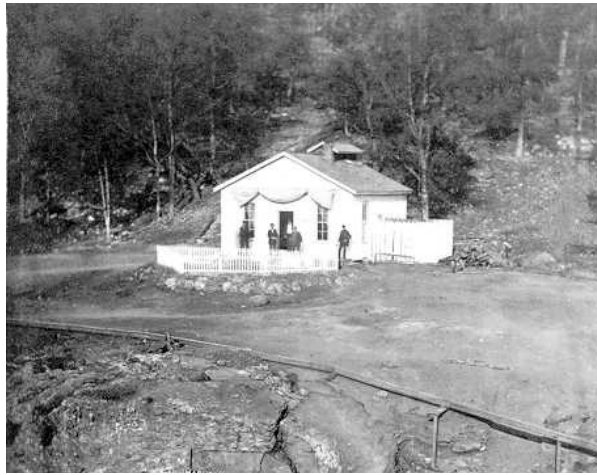
THE GOVERNMENT FREE BATHHOUSES



"Ral Hole" in 1867

The first free "bathhouses" for indigents were the dugout pools at Ral Spring, Corn Hole, and Mud Hole that operated at least as early as the mid 1960s. The first superintendent of Hot Springs Reservation, Benjamin Kelley, tried to close the popular pools with limited success. When fire

destroyed most of Bathhouse Row in 1878, a new white-washed wood frame free bathhouse was rebuilt on the site of the former Mud Hole, and Deputy Marshall James Barns was placed in charge of it. The bathhouse was behind the north end



Free Bathhouse on site of "Mud Hole" ca.1880



Brick Government Free Bathhouse circa 1895

of the current Quapaw Bathhouse site. This building was eventually razed to make way for a new two-story brick Government Free Bathhouse that opened in 1891. This bathhouse was remodeled in 1898 and 1902, extensively rebuilt in 1893, and again remodeled in 1908 to replace substandard tubs with pools. It remained in use until 1921, when the government completed a new free bathhouse between Spring and Reserve Streets south of the Army-Navy duplexes

The new Government Free Bathhouse was designed by Little Rock architects Mann and Stern and cost a staggering \$275,000 to build. The handsome building followed Hot Springs National Park architectural tradition by incorporating such Spanish features as a red tile roof, stucco exterior, arched doorways and red tile floors. When the free bathhouse closed on March 22, 1957, Hot Springs National Park Superintendent Donald Libby worked diligently with park service and city officials to transform the vacant building into a



Interior of Government Free Bathhouse circa 1938

The center's corporation was partially liquidated on December 31, 1977, when the stocks were conveyed to Leland F. Felix, a local physical therapist, but the Physical Medicine Center was again rejuvenated when the Hot Springs Health Spa opened on April 16, 1981. Both are still in operation today in different portions of the building.

modern center for physical therapy and hydrotherapy. These efforts culminated in the opening of the Hot Springs Physical Medicine Center on the 15th of January, 1958. After Libby died suddenly of a heart attack in 1959, the city and Hot Springs National Park recognized his work in establishing the new center by renaming it "The Libby Memorial Physical Medicine Center" at a dedication ceremony on October 2, 1960. The



Spring Street entrance to Free Bathhouse circa 1953



Reserve Street entrance circa 1953