





THE OMNI HOMESTEAD RESORT



Healing Properties

The rehabilitation of Virginia's Omni Homestead Resort included nearly 1,000 windows and its famous thermal pools

The old photograph is telling, even in black and white. Seven men and women sit around a curving indoor pool, their feet dangling in the water. It's the 1920s, and they are clad in the modest swimwear of the time, tank-top style with shorts or skirts. In the pool, several bathers are submerged up to their necks. One young person grins at the camera; others crowd in a doorway, observing. It looks like the perfect outing, but for one thing: The building is clearly falling apart.

Sagging wood framing, rotting planks, missing roof shingles, and peeling paint—this was the state of the bathhouses in Warm Springs, Virginia, a hundred years ago. For centuries now, these natural thermal pools, which boast water temperatures around 98 degrees Fahrenheit,

BY KIM O'CONNELL | PHOTOGRAPHY BY LINCOLN BARBOUR



Opening page: The rehabilitated Ladies' Bath at the Warm Springs Pools, part of The Omni Homestead Resort in Bath County, Virginia. *This page:* The 483-room hotel is nestled into a rolling landscape of forests and mountains.

have been a popular attraction in Bath County, a forested mountain province on the state's western edge. But wood and moisture—and steamy, warm moisture, at that—don't make for a lasting marriage. By the time the Ingalls family, then the owners and caretakers, were holding their annual pool parties there in the '20s, the bathhouses were in an obvious state of decay.

Nearly a century later, after a succession of owners and long-deferred maintenance, the bathhouses would be deemed unsafe and closed. And so they might have remained, had they not been included in a major rehabilitation of The Omni Homestead Resort in the adjacent hamlet of Hot Springs.

A collection of more than 50 upscale and luxury hotels in the United States and Canada, Omni Hotels & Resorts acquired the Homestead hotel property—2,300 acres of guest rooms, meeting spaces, outdoor recreation areas, and the bathhouse complex—in 2013. At the center of it all is the main brick hotel, a Colonial Revival masterpiece with sprawling wings and a central tower, built between 1901 and 1929 after a fire destroyed an older wooden hotel on the site. The resort offers a lavish and picturesque experience for travelers, with multiple dining spaces, shopping, golf, spa treatments, and other activities, from falconry to axe throwing. Listed

on the National Register of Historic Places since 1984, the resort was named a National Historic Landmark in 1991 and is a member of the National Trust's Historic Hotels of America program. As we approached on a recent visit, my 13-year-old daughter exclaimed, "It looks like Hogwarts!"

But getting it that way didn't involve magic so much as planning, extensive research, creative funding, and a commitment to seeing the project through. A rehabilitation was part of the plan for years, according to company officials, but the project became much more complex than anyone could have predicted—all while the pandemic saw the hospitality sector lose more revenue and jobs than nearly any other industry.

"From the first day that we bought it, our senior team would go out there and notice two things—that the resort was tired and rundown, but that we all loved going there," says Mike Smith, executive vice president of real estate and development for TRT Holdings, Omni's Dallas-based parent company. "It was just an amazing setting. So we really started digging in and developing the scope of the restoration. Our original plan was to start work around 2017, I think it was, and be done about 2019. We were pushing it along, and that's when we realized we didn't know what we didn't know."

Some parts of the hotel had not been renovated in 100 years, and it showed. A one-star review on TripAdvisor from 2003 sniffed that the resort was "resting on its long past grand" reputation. In some places, the level of decay and disrepair was staggering: loose bricks, rotting wood, water leaks, shifting foundations, spalling surfaces, and patchwork repairs that were themselves failing. Rehabilitating the hotel was going to involve a massive amount of facade and interior improvements, repair work, and mechanical upgrades.

"The first best thing that happened to us was that we slowed down and really studied what was behind the walls—the plumbing systems, the electrical systems, the HVAC and the steam system," Smith recalls. "We realized that there was a lot more work that needed to be done. Then the second best thing that happened to us, for the sake of getting this project right, was COVID. In early 2020, our company's cash flow went to zero. Thankfully, things kind of rebounded fairly quickly, and we were able to get the project started. But what COVID gave us is an extra year to 18 months to further study the project."

None of it would have worked if the company hadn't been consulting closely with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources (DHR). It helped that, for DHR Director and State Historic Preservation Officer Julie Langan, the Homestead was personal. She had fond

memories of visiting the resort with her family as a teenager. Also, working in historic preservation in Arkansas had exposed her to that state's well-known mineral springs tradition, so when she returned to Virginia—where she has served as the state historic preservation officer for the past decade—rehabilitating the Homestead and saving the Warm Springs bathhouses were paramount.

At the end of the research and planning process, an \$80 million project had expanded into a \$155 million one that would require some creative funding strategies, including the use of federal and state historic tax credits. The company also successfully lobbied the Virginia state legislature to allow counties to impose an additional

A mural on the walls of the Presidential Suite depicts the property's lush landscape. Wimberly Allison Tong & Goo was the architect of record for the hotel's exterior restoration and interior renovation.



5 percent lodging tax on historic properties, in cases where certain conditions were met. Bath County opted to do so and agreed to rebate the money to the hotel over a 30-year period, provided the renovations took place.

Omni contracted with Tampa-based Complete Property Services (CPS) to restore the exterior, including the building's stucco, terra cotta, limestone, metalwork, columns, porches, and brick masonry. Its work also entailed the repair and preservation of almost a thousand original wood windows and a few dozen doors. Interior work, managed by HITT Contracting,



The hotel's impressive Great Hall contains 16 two-story Corinthian columns, coffered ceilings, and abundant natural light. An afternoon social hour with pastries and teas takes place there every weekday.

included historically sensitive upgrades to the hotel's Great Hall—a serene welcome space with plush chairs, soft lighting, and a grand piano—as well as an update to the circa-1923 theater (which was showing *Dirty Dancing*, as perfect a resort movie there is, on the day we visited). All 483 guest rooms were renovated.

Often, the way historic properties deal with sealing up original wooden windows is to place storm windows on the inside. But in this case, Omni opted for a system developed by CPS and building envelope specialist Arnold & Associates, which consulted on the project. The team installed a nearly imperceptible pane of glass on the exterior of each window, so views both inside and outside are preserved. To seal up the building and prevent water and air from seeping in, a chronic issue at the Homestead in recent years, the century-old windows are no longer operable by guests. All the historic weights and pulleys in the windows were removed, and the sashes screwed tight and sealed; the exterior UV glass reduces heat

transfer between the panes. But the windows have all been repaired and repainted and, most importantly, they retain their historic appearance.

Other materials were treated with similar sensitivity. The restorers made more than 20,000 square feet of masonry and limestone repairs. (“That’s *square* feet, not linear feet,” emphasizes Leta Hardy, CPS vice president.)

Where possible, local trades contributed to the effort, particularly the retooling of original and historic copper and wood. “We found local people who had worked on the Homestead before, or their parents had worked on the Homestead,” Hardy says. “These folks were invaluable on this metal work. Anything you see that is curved is either hammered metal or wood. There was just nothing new; everything had to be removed, rebuilt, and reinstalled.” And it basically had to happen—pane by pane, brick by brick, and wing by wing—while the hotel remained open. Aside from a three-month closure at the beginning of the pandemic and a few weeks when hotel rooms were closed for

some electrical work, the resort has welcomed guests through the entire project.

“I refer to it as an outside-in renovation and an inside-out renovation,” says Mark Spadoni, managing director of the Omni Homestead. “We sealed the building before we went about doing all the work on the inside. Then we had to work at the infrastructure of the building ... and they both had to kind of come together, because if you’re going to put all the millions of dollars into restoring this and you don’t have the elements the way that you want to, then basically you’re putting good money on something that’s not going to last.”

With so much to contend with at the hotel, Mike Smith admits that restoring the bathhouses was not in Omni’s viewfinder, not at first. But Langan was determined. “Visiting these places, I realized that there was nothing like what’s in Warm Springs,” Langan says. “These bathhouses were never commonplace, but there used to be many more of them in the region So the fact that they were still there ... I was just blown away. And that started my odyssey of trying to get two or three [consecutive] owners engaged in their preservation, and it took 10 years.”

Local and state preservation organizations kept the pressure on, too. Preservation Virginia put the pools on its annual Most Endangered Historic Places list in 2010. In the tradition of grassroots preservationists nationally, Preservation Bath’s bright yellow “Save the Pools” signs were plentiful along the 6-mile stretch between the hotel and the springs. “We got a lot of public outcry about the bathhouses,” Smith says. “Julie pushed us and said, ‘Look, I really want you to do these bathhouses, and we’ll work with you to make it happen.’”

Although it’s likely that Native Americans in the region were aware of the springs, the recorded history of the pools begins with European settlement around 1750. In the 1760s, local landowners built an octagonal structure to frame one of the springs. The Homestead resort dates to about 1766, when Thomas Bullitt built the first hotel on the property. By then, the curative qualities of mineral springs had been well documented in Europe and were gaining favor throughout the United States. William Burke, a doctor who published a book about Virginia’s thermal pools in the 1840s, noted their “temperature, buoyancy, refractive power, [and]

transparency ... all invest it with indescribable luxury to the feelings and to the sight.”

In 1818, Thomas Jefferson visited the baths to ease his rheumatoid arthritis. By 1831, a full bathhouse had been built on the site. It eventually became known as the Gentlemen’s Bath, with dressing rooms and appendages added in subsequent years. A second, larger polygonal building was constructed around 1875, serving as the Ladies’ Bath, and an adjacent reception house was built around 15 years later. The Gentlemen’s Bath is believed to be one of the oldest extant buildings of its type in the country. “The pool is as clear as crystal,” enthused a *New York Times* reporter in 1913, “and the bathers could be seen as clearly under water as on the surface.”

The bathhouses are also intertwined with Black history in western Virginia. Although sources are scarce,

The historic bathhouses were built over natural hot springs. Hotel guests as well as other members of the public can “take the waters” Tuesdays through Sundays.



at least one book asserts that construction of the first Homestead hotel involved enslaved labor. Enslaved people may have helped to build the bathhouses, too. After the Civil War, generations of Black families worked as bathhouse attendants and lived in the reception house, including the Tonsler family, whose members worked there for 90 years.

“My aunt had certain freedoms there that she would have never had if she was working right in the hotel,” John Reddick told Allegheny Mountain Radio in 2012,



This page, from left: The Presidential Suite and the Washington Library showcase the renovation's lighter color palette. *Opposite:* The New York City architectural firm of Warren and Wetmore designed the Colonial Revival central tower, completed in 1929. Its rehabilitation included a restoration of the clock tower and cupola, among many other repairs.

recalling his aunt, Estelle Tonsler, who worked in the Ladies' Bath during the height of Jim Crow segregation. "We could come with her and stay in her place of employ ... which she could have never done if she was in the hotel."

Langan worked with Omni to assemble a Bathhouse Advisory Board and to commission a historic structure report by Terry Ammons of StudioAmmons and Gibson Worsham of Glavé & Holmes Architecture. The team engaged Richmond, Virginia, firm 3North to design the project and Lionberger Construction of Roanoke, Virginia, to build it. Simultaneously, Langan worked to convince the National Park Service (keepers of the National Register) that the project was worthy of historic tax credits, even though much of the historic wood would be replaced.

"You can't build a frame structure over a moist environment and not have to replace wood," she says. "And so normally a structure with this much replacement material could be problematic, but we made the case to the Park Service that it's part of what makes these buildings significant, and it couldn't have been any other way. And they agreed."

The rehabilitation involved preserving or replacing the historic wood structure, windows, doors, siding, and roofing and repairing the foundation piers for both bathhouses. Computer modeling and 3D scanning helped to inform the effort. One significant change was returning the roof of the Ladies' Bath—covered by an angular, circa-1950s roof—to its elegant former domed shape.

"I really like the idea that these are very old structures, but most of the wood in them is not that old," says Ed Pillsbury, principal of 3North. "There are few original pieces, and there's this story of them falling down [figuratively] and getting fixed up again in these 50-year cycles. I love the idea that this isn't the end-all, be-all—like, we fixed it, and now it's trapped in amber. Fifty years from now somebody else is going to come along and do exactly what we did. Well, not exactly, but I'm hopeful that there's going to be a next person who will look at what we did and say, 'They did not mess up that part of that story.'"

Since the bathhouses reopened in December of 2022, they have been wildly popular. It's worth noting that, while high-end spa services at the Omni Homestead can run into the hundreds of dollars, it's only \$30 per hour to take the waters in the Warm Springs Pools. Mark Spadoni estimates that 70 to 75 percent of visitors who visit the Warm Springs Pools are not hotel guests. He adds that local business owners have told him that the rehabilitation has already provided an economic boost to the county, still emerging from the losses of the pandemic.

"I believe, and a lot of people believe, that the best years for Hot Springs, for Bath County, are in the future, not the past," Spadoni says. "That was our rallying cry. We did this for the Homestead to still be here in 2123." **P**

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