

Story by Paul Carnahan
Photos courtesy of the
Vermont Historical Society

VERMONT HISTORY

Vermont's Hydropathic Resorts

Vermont's Love Affair with Mineral Springs

WATER HAS BEEN ESSENTIAL TO THE DEVELOPMENT of Vermont. The indigenous peoples and the early European settlers all used it for transportation into the unpopulated areas of the region. Later, farmers used it to hydrate their crops and mechanics used it to power machinery. Foresters used it to transport timber and mill owners used it to make paper. Today, we use it to cool industrial processes, generate power, and provide recreational opportunities.

In the mid and late 19th century, water had yet another, much more specific use for Vermonters and visitors alike, during the era when mineral springs and hydropathic water cures dotted the landscape and attracted adherents from around the country looking for good health and relaxation. Similar to the patent medicines that were popular at this time, water for consumption or soaking promised cures for many of the population's ailments.

Brattleboro, in the southeastern corner of the state, was home to two of the state's earliest hydrotherapy institutions. In 1845, Robert Wesselhoeft, a native of Chemnitz, Germany, opened the Brattleboro Hydropathic Institution where the treatment included 18-hour days of hot and cold baths, simple food, and



The brochure at left was produced to attract visitors to Montvert, the luxurious, spring-fed hotel in Middletown Springs. The Valley Hotel (above) was an older and more affordable alternative to the Montvert. In 1897, rooms at the Valley Hotel were \$1.50 per night, while those at the Montvert were a hefty (for the times) \$3.50 per night.

This fine 1850 chromolithograph shows the Clarendon House in all of its Victorian-era glory. The building was constructed in 1837 with 120 rooms and expanded with the addition of two more stories just a few years later, in order to accommodate the demand. A bottling plant was located in the basement from which containers of the water were shipped to a national market.



W.C. Sharpe Lith. Boston

Alfred A. Hink

CLARENDON HOUSE.

At CLARENDON SPRINGS Vermont: By Thomas McLaughlin, Proprietor, 1850.

A photograph of the impressive wraparound porch at the Clarendon House (right). This building still stands and is on the National Register of Historic Places. A fountain and rustic park bench accent this restful setting: the grounds of the Clarendon Springs House (below).



long walks. Fortuitously, the railroad arrived in Brattleboro four years after Robert's water cure opened, spurring development and bringing famous figures such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Martin Van Buren, and Francis Parkman to the flourishing and expensive establishment.

The institution was not the only hydropathic establishment in Brattleboro. In 1853, C.W. Grau open the Lawrence Water Cure across the street from the older resort. In addition to the gardens and verandas offered by its neighbor, the Lawrence Water Cure provided a 100-foot indoor promenade, bowling alley, and a six-room bathhouse. The proprietor created a map of drives around Brattleboro and wrote a book in 1859 entitled *Medical Parlor Gymnastics, or Systematic Explanations and Prescriptions of Movements and Exercises Practicable Under All Circumstances for the Cure and Prevention of Diseases*.

The Brattleboro Hydropathic Institution survived until 1871, but the lack of business from wealthy southern visitors who were notably absent during the Civil War made business difficult and forced the Lawrence Water Cure to close within seven years of its opening. The concept of water therapy continued in Brattleboro, however, at the psychiatric hospital in town and at large and small resorts around the state.

Neighboring Bennington County seems to have also hosted





**DR. WESSELHOEFT'S WATER-CURE ESTABLISHMENT,
AT BRATTLEBORO VERMONT,**

Will be conducted for the coming season by MRS. F. WESSELHOEFT,
assisted by the Administrators of her late Husband.

Dr. E. FELLERER, for the last two years favorably known as Consulting
Physician of the Establishment, will be continued in that capacity, and
patients may rest assured no pains will be spared to promote their health and
comfort.

MRS. F. WESSELHOEFT.

MARCH 25, 1853.

L. G. MEAD,
N. R. WILLISTON. } Administrators.

The Brattleboro Hydropathic Institution, run by Dr. Robert Wesselhoeft, started with 15 patients in 1845 and had grown to accommodate 392 patients one year later by acquiring and connecting other buildings in town; patients also stayed at other Brattleboro hostleries. After Robert Wesselhoeft died in 1852, his wife Ferdinanda attempted to carry on the business. The water cure establishment survived for another 20 years until a decline in the popularity of hydrotherapy forced it to close.

two ventures, albeit short-lived, in the field of water therapy. For a brief period in the 1850s, Dr. Joel Shew, a prominent New York City hydropath and founder of the *Water-Cure Journal*, ran the Bennington Summer Water-Cure. From May 1861 until March 1863, Dr. L.H. Sprague operated the Manchester Water-Cure near Mount Equinox. Dr. Sprague used “electromechanical and medicated baths” as a remedy for physical and mental ills.

Although the Civil War created lean times for Vermont “hydro-resorts,” they enjoyed resurgence in popularity after the war and throughout the second half of the 19th century. James A. Crook, in an 1899 book entitled *The Mineral Waters of the United States and Their Therapeutic Uses*, listed 11 operating springs. In the 1980s, geographer Harold Meeks identified 131 mineral springs’ locations in use in Vermont in the late 1880s, with 32 of them supporting hotels at one point in their histories. Railroads were an important lifeline for the mineral spring hotels: Most of the successful resorts were within five miles of a railway depot from which they provided convenient transportation to their hostleries.

According to *The Mineral Waters of the United States*, “For so small a state, Vermont is very liberally supplied with mineral springs. None of them has attained a national celebrity, but several are quite important and furnish valuable waters. ...As a rule, they are more highly mineralized than those of the other New England States.”

Although Vermont’s mineral springs did not rise to the “national celebrity” of Saratoga Springs in neighboring New York, Vermont nonetheless hosted several impressive resorts. Middletown, in 1884 renamed Middletown Springs to acknowledge the importance of water to the local economy, was home to the Montvert Hotel, built in 1871 and at one time the largest hotel in the state. The three-story hotel could accommodate 350 guests who came to partake of the benefits of the town’s springs, which were supposed to benefit those suffering from liver and kidney ailments, hay fever, chills, dyspepsia, and rheumatism. The water from one of the springs, the Montvert spring, was piped into the hotel, although James Crook says it was not mineral water but qualified as “an excellent table water.”

The Montvert, situated on 50 acres of land, featured (according to a marketing brochure) “beautifully laid out lawns and walks ... pleasant groves and shady retreats,” along with croquet, lawn tennis, billiard rooms, and a bowling alley. James noted that the ground in Middletown was formed of hard limestone, giving the roads “a macadamized smoothness,” which was beneficial to bicycling. A.W. Gray & Sons, a local manufacturer of horse treadmills, also bottled the spring waters and distributed it throughout New England. As the century turned and tastes in recreation and vacations changed, the Montvert

PROSPECTUS
OF THE
LAWRENCE
WATER-CURE,
BRATTLEBORO, VT.

OPENED MAY 13, 1853.

New-York:
PRINTED BY CURRAN DIXMORE & COMPANY,
RAILWAY GUIDE PRINTING HOUSE,
NO. 9 SPRUCE STREET.
1853.

The Lawrence Water-Cure opened in 1853 in Brattleboro, becoming the second hydropathic institution in town.



A sulfurous spring was "discovered" in Newbury about 1782 by settlers. A hotel called the Spring Hotel was in place by 1800. It reportedly had a hidden room with large chests for the concealment of smuggled goods. Another establishment in Newbury was the Montebello House. According to one listing of mineral springs, "From no other point does the White Mountain range present more majestic and impressive views than from 'Montebello,' or 'Beautiful Mountain'."



was in decline. It was auctioned off in 1906 and subsequently dismantled.

A smaller, older hotel operated in Clarendon, where mineral springs had been discovered in 1776 through a prophetic dream. The first hotel at the springs was built in 1798 and a larger brick hotel with a three-story veranda, the Clarendon House, was constructed in 1835. The Rutland and Whitehall Railroad, opened in 1850, brought visitors to the resort and helped fuel its popularity. According to James Crook, 1,500 to 2,500 people per year visited the springs in its heyday. However, austerities and disruptions of trade during the Civil War had effectively closed the resort and when it reopened in 1866, it could not compete with larger resorts such as Middletown Springs and closed permanently in 1898.

Brattleboro, Bennington, Manchester, Clarendon, and Middletown were just a few of the Vermont towns that once hosted mineral springs and their attendant hotels. Following is a list of just some of the towns that attempted to attract tourists on the basis of their springs:

- Bellows Falls, Abenaki Springs
- Brunswick, Brunswick Mineral Springs
- Cambridge, Big Spring
- Highgate, Champlain Spring
- Mt. Holly, Green Mountain Mineral Spring
- Newbury, Montbello/Spring House/Newbury House
- Panton, Elgin Spring
- Plainfield, Spring House
- Sheldon, Missisquoi Spring Co.
- South Hero, Iodine Spring
- Wheelock, Sulphur Spring
- Whitingham, Sadawga Spring
- Woodstock, Dearborn Spring

The promotion of mineral springs for both hydrotherapy and consumption as health benefits has a long history in Vermont. Although some springs fostered commercial development in particular towns, Vermont's springs were spread across the state and very popular with the vacationing public in the late 19th century. ▼

Paul Carnahan is the librarian of the Vermont Historical Society.

JUST THE FACTS

Learn more about Vermont's long and elemental history with water at the Vermont History Expo, June 18 and 19, at the Tunbridge World Fairgrounds in Tunbridge, Vermont, from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Admission: adults \$10; children \$5; ages 5 and under free; weekend pass \$20. Half price admission for visitors in period dress!

For further information, contact the Vermont Historical Society; call (802) 479-8500 or visit vermonthistory.org.