

Mt. Vernon Springs: Health and Beauty Face a Rapidly Changing Chatham

by Fred J. Vatter
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Just a few miles south of Siler City near Old US Route 421 on Mt. Vernon Springs Road there is a concrete basin holding two pipes pouring clean mineral waters from twin springs. One flow was once marked "Health" and the other was labeled "Beauty." These designations are no longer there and it would be prudent to fill a cup from each source. This peaceful area is all that remains of a once famous health spa, Mt. Vernon Springs, that attracted ailing people from far and wide. From modest beginnings in the 1830's the resort reached its heyday just before and after the turn of the century, only to decline and finally cease operations in 1931.



Changing times caused the demise of the resort – better roads, faster trains, and the easier accessibility of alternative resorts and sources of recreation all played a part, with a final blow given by the Great Depression. The abandoned buildings were gradually stripped of their valuable hand-hewn timber to be used for new homes and restoring old homes in Chatham and nearby Lee County. The surrounding woodlands again embraced the grounds, helping to protect the purity of the springs.



Legend has it that Native Americans used the springs, followed by early Quaker settlers coming down from the Cane Creek area. Chatham County Court minutes in 1777 mentioned a Quaker road in adjacent Ore Hill by the iron furnace. Early names for the area were Indian Springs, Quaker Springs, Dixon Springs, Healing Springs, and Hickory Springs.

Some folk apparently visited the springs for their healing benefits as early as 1817, but by 1837 a War of 1812 veteran named William Bowen built a small inn and cottages there and advertised it with testimonials. His clientele had to travel via a very rough seven mile road from the Raleigh-Salisbury Highway, but they came.

A hotel was built in the early 1850's and in 1852 was named Mount Vernon Springs Hotel. Local legend has it that the new name for the springs was suggested by

John Washington, a descendent of George, who built a home near them for his health around that time.

John Moreau Foust, operator of a turpentine business and a general store in Cameron had severe stomach trouble and his doctors guessed that he had about six months to live. He heard about Mt. Vernon Springs curative powers and stayed there for a month. As a result Foust showed a dramatic improvement and in 1897 bought the hotel, springs and 190 acres of land for \$1,250. Shortly thereafter he expanded the hotel, built a small store, and added a bridge and walkway between the hotel and the springs. Remains of the little concrete bridge are still visible.



The popularity of Mt. Vernon Springs increased with the coming of the Cape Fear and Yadkin Valley Railway (1884) whose Ore Hill Station was nearby. Carriages carried guests one mile to the hotel. The springs' water was also shipped to customers by the railroad, about 500 gallons daily being the average amount. For a while in the early 1900's it was even flavored and bottled as soda pop. In time a private power plant generated electricity for the hotel. Food for the guests was grown on the hotel's surrounding acreage. Room rates averaged from \$1.50 per pay to \$25 monthly. Sometimes families even brought their servants to stay at the resort. During the winter and fall hunters used the hotel, and in time day-trippers came on Sunday afternoons.



A community developed around the resort and at the close of the 19th century Mt. Vernon Springs had a permanent population of approximately 100, a doctor's office, a post office, a general store, a Presbyterian Church, a couple of blacksmiths, a Masonic Lodge, Mt. Vernon Springs Academy which had both male and female departments, and a number of farmers.

A good portion of the bustling settlement around the springs has disappeared over the years as weather, age and some vandalism have taken their toll. Fortunately, nature has kept the springs remaining clear and the dedication of local volunteers, especially from Mt. Vernon Springs Presbyterian Church, has kept the cement basin in repair and provided a shelter for the flow.

Chatham has experienced many changes over the past two centuries, with communities, farms and industries waxing and waning. The county's former low population density served to mitigate or conceal the effects of many of these changes, allowing the land to heal itself.

Suddenly development has come at the pace of an avalanche as developers from far and wide take advantage of the triangle's need for more bedroom space. More and more Chatham County land is being cleared for homes, roads and parking lots. Enough white and orange barrels line our roads to cause newcomers to believe that they are our state flower. Streams and branches that ran crystal clear just ten years ago, which had schools of little fish swimming upstream against the current every Spring, are now reduced by run-off to silt-laden ditches devoid of life. Kingfishers and Blue Herons don't even bother to hunt on the banks anymore. The Haw River runs tan and swimming in parts of Jordan Lake is akin to dunking oneself in Gatorade.



To date Mount Vernon Springs continues to flow clean and clear in spite of occasional vandalism and littering. Let's hope that it will continue to be spared from careless development and thoughtless visitors, so that passers-by will be able to pause for a dose of health, beauty and relaxation for many years to come.

Fred J. Vatter is a past president of the Chatham Historical Society, an organization for which he has also served as a board member and museum curator.
