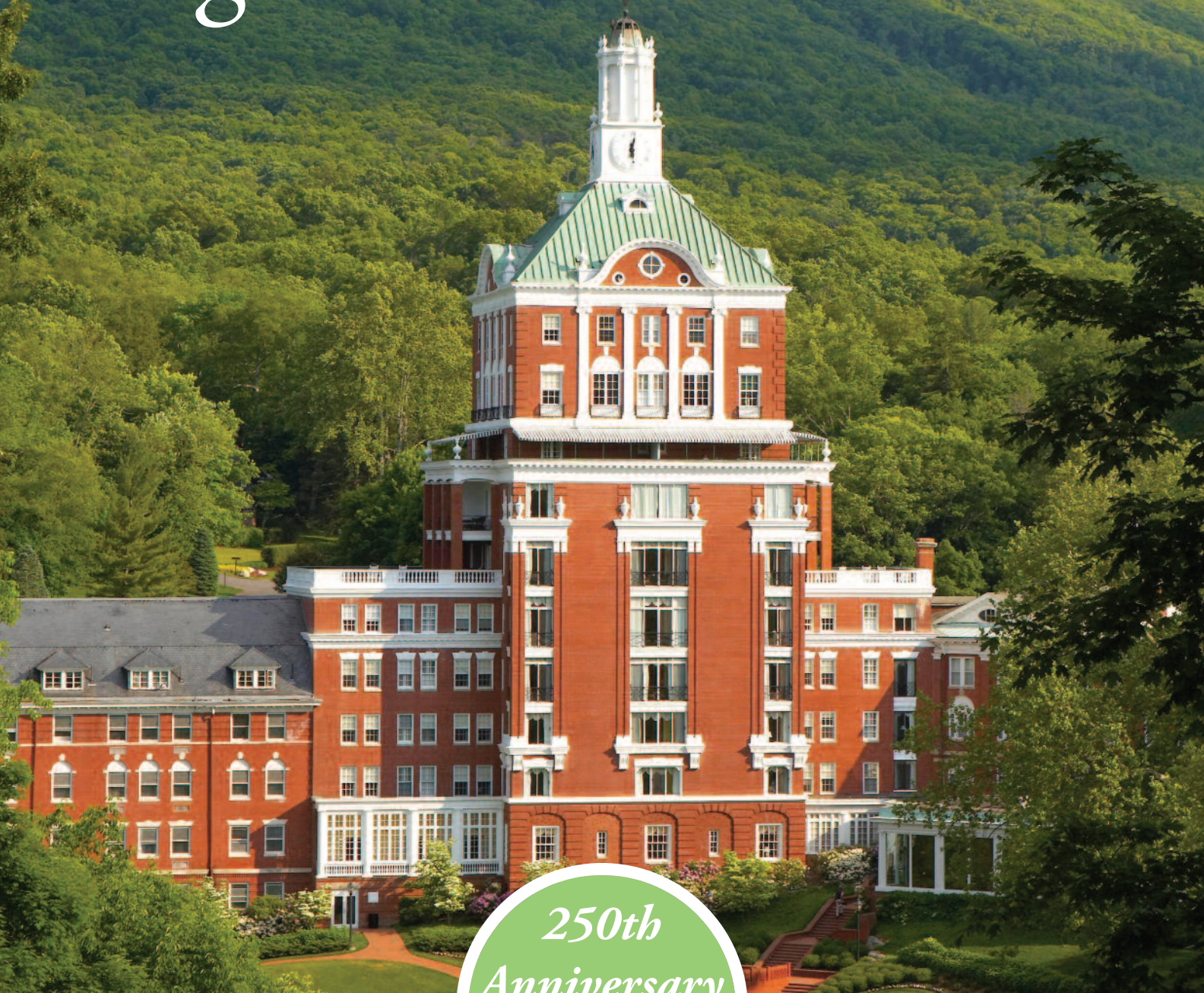


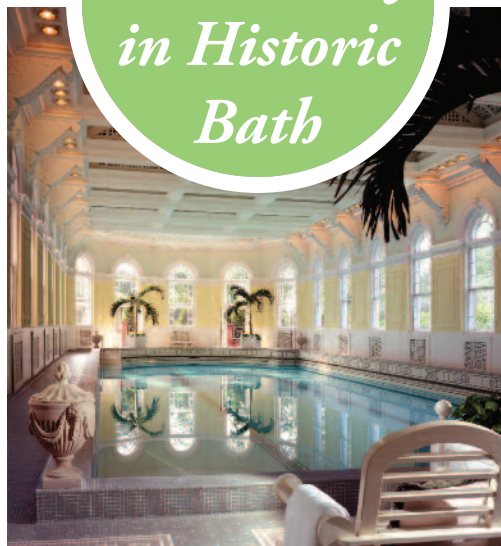
# Virginia's Grande Dame



*250th  
Anniversary  
in Historic  
Bath*



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# The Omni Homestead Resort Celebrates 250th Anniversary in Style

A decade before America was born, a small lodge was built in the Allegheny Mountains of Western Virginia for travelers to experience the “healing” waters of the natural mineral springs.

Over the next 2½ centuries, the property grew to become The Omni Homestead Resort, a world-class venue that has welcomed generations of vacationers, presidents, royalty, celebrities and Virginia governors.

“The Homestead Resort is a jewel of Virginia’s tourism economy,” said Gov. Terry McAuliffe in response to a writer’s query. “As a destination for travelers from across the globe this magnificent historic hotel offers a truly Virginian experience for all. I’ve enjoyed many personal and professional trips to this wonderful economic engine and look forward to going back any chance I get.”

Now the luxury resort 210 miles from Washington, D.C., in the county of Bath is observing its 250th anniversary with a year-long celebration.

“We have so many activities and events planned, we couldn’t fit them all into one weekend, or even one month, so we’re going to celebrate every day,” says Managing Director David Jurcak.

For starters, the pastry team presents a different cake flavor every afternoon. One lucky guest is invited to blow out the candle before everyone samples the day’s sweet delight, perhaps triple chocolate or carrot cake.

Not to be outdone, the culinary team showcases menu items and classic cocktails from the resort’s past on Saturdays in the Main Dining Room.



Each month has a theme — such as presidents, fashion, entertainment, transportation, golf and architecture — with daily “fun facts” about the area. For example, the movie *Sommersby*, starring Richard Gere and Jodie Foster, was filmed in the county and many of the actors were spotted around the resort. In addition, Eugene Allen, who inspired the film *The Butler*, was a Homestead employee before going to the White House.

Concerts, fireworks, fireside chats, a speaker series and special retail items, such as pewter ornaments, mugs and apparel, are part of the festivities celebrating the resort’s 1766 founding — 10 years before the Declaration of Independence.

## ENDURING APPEAL

“Magical” is a word that’s often used to describe The Homestead. After a long drive on scenic mountain roads, a first-time visitor is astonished at the first glimpse of the Georgian-style, red-brick complex rising like a castle over the village of Hot Springs. The hotel is sumptuous and chock-full of modern amenities, yet it retains old-fashioned Southern ambience, a throwback to the perceived grandeur of bygone days. It’s a place where guests still “dress” for dinner in the formal dining room, sip afternoon tea in the Great Hall, and relax in the veranda’s rocking chairs admiring the view — especially splendid in autumn. People come to vacation, play sports, attend parties and conventions, get married and celebrate special occasions.

The resort wears its history like a favorite sweater.

Back in 1766, guests reached the original 18-room wooden hotel by horseback and stagecoach. It was named The Homestead for the homesteaders who built it, drawn by the stories of American Indians and surveyors about the rejuvenating mineral springs that seemed to remedy assorted ailments.

The Homestead between 1902 and 1929, before its trademark tower was added.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE OMNI HOMESTEAD RESORT





Recreational opportunities at The Omni Homestead Resort range from horse-drawn carriage rides to golf in scenic mountain surroundings.

After a new railroad spur eased access to Hot Springs in the 1880s, a larger hotel was built. Unfortunately, it was destroyed by fire in 1901; only the spa building, the Casino building (now a casual restaurant) and Cottage Row structures were saved. By 1902, the resort's main section was rebuilt and in later years expanded with a trademark tower and East, West, and Garden Wings.

Homestead historian Keene Byrd and archivist Cindy White point to two heydays in the resort's history, the late 1800s and the 1940s-1960s. Back in the day, it was fashionable for socialites to "take the waters" at The Homestead. Some stayed for weeks, such as the arthritic wife of Gen. Robert E. Lee.

Guests have included 23 presidents, starting with Thomas Jefferson, who relieved his "rheumatism" in the warm springs now known as the Jefferson Pools. William Howard Taft campaigned for president from the porch, and Thomas Edison made a recording of Taft's speech (now in the Smithsonian Institution). Edison, a frequent visitor, built the hotel's first power plant, which still exists.

Byrd, who gives daily history tours, has to correct visitors on one misperception — The Homestead does not have a historic emergency underground bunker for Congress — that's The Greenbrier resort in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia.

The modern Homestead has 483 guest rooms and suites; conference space; formal and casual restaurants; ballrooms; a movie theater; a library; a state-of-the-art spa with an aqua thermal suite; a spa garden with a river reflexology walk; and a two-acre

family water park with a lazy river. Guests can still soak in the historic hot springs or in the 98-degree waters of the Jefferson Pools in nearby Warm Springs, where the oldest of two wooden bathhouses dates to 1761.

The 2,300-acre, four-season property has a boatload of recreational activities, including skiing, tennis, swimming, fishing, hiking, skeet shooting, horseback riding, archery, paintball, Segways, carriage rides and even falconry. The resort is especially known for its golf program, which has produced two tour players (Sam Snead and J.C. Snead), served as training ground for 37 golf professionals, and nurtured countless amateur golfers.

"The [Homestead's] Cascades Course is to amateur golf what Pebble Beach has been to professional golf," says Don Ryder, the resort's former golf director.

The resort's Old Course has the nation's oldest first tee in continuous use.

The hotel enjoys a fine reputation. *Condé Nast Traveler* readers cite The Homestead as among the top 20 resorts in the South.

"The Homestead is one of the oldest and most treasured resorts in the Commonwealth, and beloved by people from across the country and the world," says Caroline Logan of Virginia Tourism Corporation.

#### LOYAL GUESTS AND STAFF

Guests and staff alike have genuine affection for The Homestead. There's a sense of family, with generations of guests returning, according to Managing

Director Jurcak. He heard of one family who has enjoyed Thanksgiving dinner at the hotel for 38 years — with the same server each time.

Among frequent guests are brothers Channing M. Hall III, an attorney, and J. Lesslie Hall III, a Realtor, from Williamsburg, Virginia. Three generations of their family, starting with their grandparents, have found The Homestead to be "a home away from home." Their father "decompressed" at the resort after World War II, and as youngsters the Hall boys attended summer camp in the county and hiked Warm Springs Mountain. Over the years, the Hall family has celebrated birthdays and holidays at the resort, though a special occasion wasn't needed for a visit.

The Hall siblings find the resort appealing for several reasons.

One is the multitude of activities offered, including sporting clays, which they both enjoy. Or, there is the option of just relaxing with a book.

"If someone is bored at The Homestead there's something wrong with them," says Lesslie.

The brothers joke The Homestead is a place where guests can lose track of time.

"You get in a Bath County time warp and all is well," says Lesslie.

Channing considers the resort a "paradigm of Virginia hospitality" and appreciates its "understated elegance." He adds that "taking the waters" at the Jefferson Pools is one of the quintessential Homestead experiences, and a stay at the resort is reinvigorating and "good for the soul."





The resort's Allegheny Springs area has a water play zone, lazy river and water slides. The heated outdoor pool is open year-round and also used for ice skating in winter months.



Both praise the “fantastic” staff. Channing likes seeing the “smiling face” of Woody Pettus, maître d’ in the Main Dining Room (a 55-year employee), who “epitomizes the grace and elegance and charm of The Homestead.”

A number of the employees have worked at the resort for decades — the longest for 66 years.

Ryder, the golf director, recently retired after a 42-year career at The Homestead, although he’s going to assist with the 250th anniversary. He says five generations of his family and six generations of his wife’s family have worked there.

One of the biggest changes he’s seen has been the resort’s evolution from primarily a golf venue to a family-oriented resort with a host of activities.

“You can’t do it all in one trip,” he says.

He cites the friendliness of the community as a plus, and thinks Omni Hotels & Resorts has done a great job of bringing a sense of stability since acquiring the property in 2013.

According to Jurcak, Omni is committed to being long-term stewards of the property, planning renovations and additional activities as it looks to the future.

Jurcak indicates that while many hotels experience change all around them, The Homestead has a timeless quality.

“Here, things don’t change,” he says, adding a visit to the resort is “something you will continue to remember.” ■

**THE OMNI HOMESTEAD RESORT:**  
7696 Sam Snead Highway, Hot Springs, VA  
24445; 800-838-1766; [www.omnihotels.com/hotels/homestead-virginia](http://www.omnihotels.com/hotels/homestead-virginia)

## Diversity, Surprises Await in Virginia’s County of Bath

The stresses of city life melt away as visitors drive the winding mountain roads to The Omni Homestead Resort. The scenic rural landscape — more than half the county is protected by national and state forests and The Nature Conservancy — is devoid of stoplights and streetlights, making star-gazing sublime. Picturesque settings attract many weddings.

The wilderness is a sportsman’s paradise for camping, hiking, boating, mountain biking, horseback riding, birding, hunting and fishing. Lake Moomaw and Douthat State Park are major recreational draws.

With just 4,700 residents, the county is close-knit, but welcoming to visitors. It’s a place where the waitress at the Country Café, a local favorite, knows what the regulars will order. Yet, there is also an air of sophistication; visitors often are surprised to learn of the county’s cultural opportunities, fine dining, unique shops, and unusual accommodations.

For example, the Garth Newel Music Center presents 60 chamber music concerts a year featuring world-

class musicians and gourmet meals inside a converted horse barn.

A flourishing arts scene includes fine arts and crafts galleries in the Warm Springs Arts District; a Plein Air Festival; artisan items in Hot Springs’ shops; and an artists’ retreat at the 1783 Nimrod Hall. Antiques shops, such as the 1908 Old Ashwood School Antiques, operate from repurposed buildings.

Dining options include Les Cochons d’Or, a French-American restaurant, and The Inn at Gristmill Square, offering fine cuisine in a 1900-era mill.

Some innkeepers at the diverse bed-and-breakfasts have longtime hospitality backgrounds and are used to dealing with international clientele. The Fort Lewis Lodge is on the Select Registry of Distinguished Inns of North America. Natural Retreats rents out high-end vacation homes. And travelers who consider Europe for a luxurious repose will find they need look no further than The Homestead.

**COUNTY OF BATH OFFICE OF TOURISM:**  
[www.DiscoverBath.com](http://www.DiscoverBath.com); 540-839-7202