

John Fry, Warm Springs, and Perceval Reniers

While researching for a blog post I was planning to write about my Fry family and the “bathing” industry, I discovered a delightful book – The Springs of Virginia: Life, Love, and Death at the Waters 1775 – 1900. It was written by Perceval Reniers, and published in 1941 by University of North Carolina Press. I was so enchanted by the stories of Colonel John Fry, and his Warm Springs Resort that I knew I had to share more than a few brief paragraphs in a blog post. Below I have transcribed the better part of two chapters from Reniers’ book. Colonel John Fry was the proprietor of the Warm Springs in Bath County Virginia during the 1830’s and early 1840’s. He was well remembered by many of his visitors, and Reniers tells his story with warmth and enthusiasm. Enjoy! - Pam Garrett, 2018

Chapter 2 – Taking the Springs Tour

By the 1830’s, after more than a half a century of trial and error, the Southerner had evolved his method of taking the waters: he took them in quantity and he took them seriatim. That is, he made the Springs Tour, visiting as many resorts in a season as time and money would allow. The phrase at home in the lowlands was, he was going “up to the Springs”, always in the plural . . .

The region of the Virginia Springs straddled the continental divide, sprawling through the long valleys and over the equally long ridges of the Alleghenies. Anyone beginning at the Warm Springs, which was the northeasterly point of the region . . . Down through the center lay the inner group, the fountains most strongly impregnated with minerals, heat, fashion and fame – the Warm, the Hot, the White Sulphur, the Sweet, the Salt Sulphur and the Red Sulphur. For the most part they were connected by good turnpike roads, and in order to make the circuit of the lot one had to cut back and forth across the mountains, up out of one valley and down into another, travelling in all about a hundred and seventy miles.

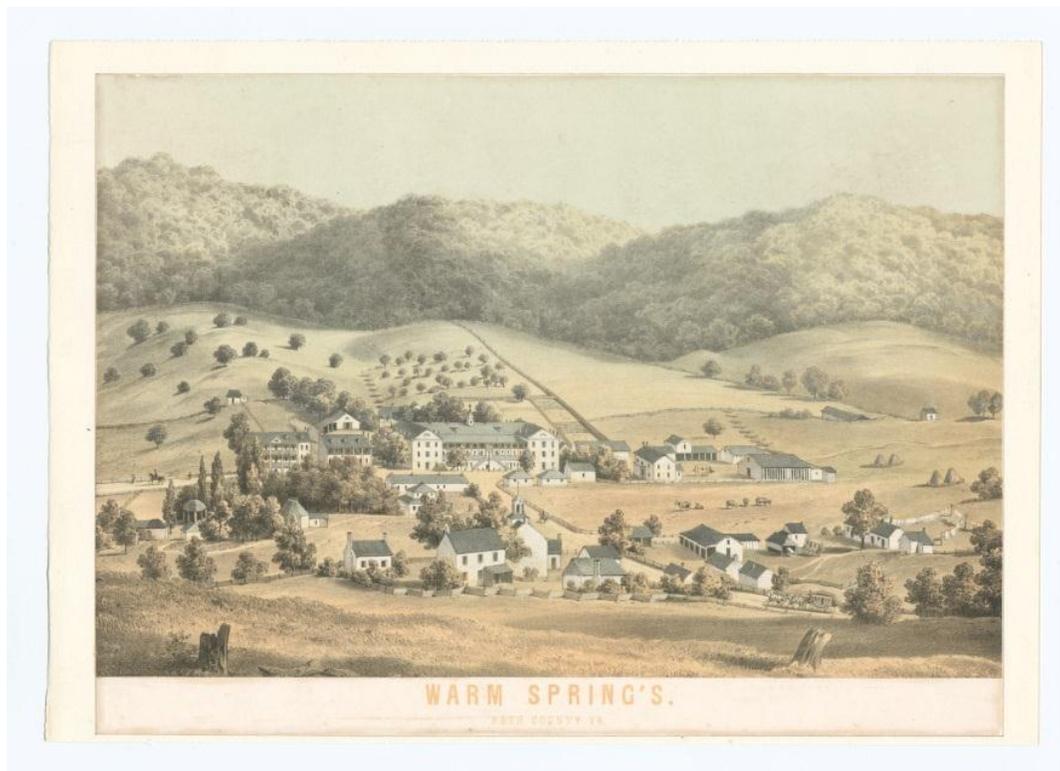
Almost everybody went in at the Warm Springs and came out the same way. That was natural. The first turnpike that pierced the region was laid over the top of the Warm Springs Mountain, dipping swiftly down and skirting the edge of the wondrous bubbling pool as it ran westward . . .

Standing on his high-pillared portico, Colonel John Fry, the happy landlord of the Warm, could see each stagecoach as it appeared in the gap of the mountain up on the sky line. It stopped there to rest the horses, pay toll at the gate, and let the passengers get the view. Then it tipped its weight toward the valley and with one wheel chain-locked raced down that dizzy, zig-zag mile until it pulled up at Colonel Fry’s feet, every passenger dithering from fright.

The popular thing was, to alight at the Warm and then be off again with all possible speed. That would mean overnight and not more than over two nights. When we consider that Colonel Fry’s hospitality was among the best at the Springs and that it was by all odds the most

amusing, it seems a grateless thing for people to have flown from it as they were accustomed to fly from the cholera.

Their overnight stay was just long enough to see the Colonel cut his pigeon-wing in the ballroom and to make a visit to Charley, the colored bartender, in the basement story, where the wine was cooled in a spring and stag horns bristled from the walls. It was just time to sink like a sigh into the soft warm liquid of the pool, just time to inquire what was the news from the White and to get it. It was always bad . . . If there was a seat to be had in one of the morning coaches, they were away early.



Colonel Fry was the kind of landlord who could see them spurning the delights that he and the Almighty had prepared for them and make a jest of it. He was on hand betimes to help them into the coach or hack and he sent them off with a joke, his own precious, perennial joke. Go, said he, and get well charged at the White Sulphur, well salted at the Salt, well sweetened at the Sweet, well boiled at the Hot and then let them return to him and he would Fry them. They would return, he knew, at least many of them would. A final stay at the Warm was the last move in the game they were at with the waters .

. . . But most of the Springs folk wouldn't have missed the last days of parting at the Warm for anything. Colonel Fry awaited them, now that they had been charged, salted, sweetened and boiled at the other places; it was not in their hearts to disappoint him. The great scales on his portico awaited them too, those fine old scales with the seat under the beam where they had sat to weigh going in; now they must weigh going out and count the extra pounds.

During the final sad-happy week they exchanged their souvenirs and their mutual invitations for long visits; . . . they counted over the summer's gossip gathered from place to place and they soaked the accumulated minerals out of themselves in the delicious pool. For the last time that season they looked upon Colonel Fry and his fat wife and his fine ham and mutton and iced milk, and for the last time Charley mixed them an incomparable brandy julep downstairs. Then one September morning early Fry would help to boost them into their coaches and they would be off.

from Chapter 7 – Boom in Cottage Rows

At two of the Springs the boom of the mid-Thirties had not caught in fertile ground; they were the Sweet and the Warm . . .

The Warm Springs, that other ancient, had some time since been built up and was already running down. Numerous small cabins scattered about were considered, with the hotel, to be sufficient to the needs of the place . . .

The Warm Springs are free and easy – the White Sulphur for Etiquette,” exclaimed Latrobe. People loved the Warm as they did the companionship of an old friend, for its very homeliness, for the luxury of the pool, for the food and particularly for Colonel John Fry. As long as that short-legged, fat, joking, jumping-jack of a man was on hand, the huts and mean pillows could be overlooked. He was the greatest boniface of them all, so great that even the chronic croakers fell under his spell. Even Harry Humbug . . . found handsome thing to say of Fry: “one of the most polite, accommodating and facetious landlords that ever lived”.

Coachfuls of arrivals drawing up in front of the hotel were greeted by not underling, no aid-de-camp but by Fry himself, call out, “A merry welcome to you, gentlemen!” like a landlord in a book and handing the ladies out of the coach with elaborate gestures, giving them an arm up the steps and into the ladies’ parlor while the gentlemen went straight into the office in the basement story, or as straight as possible with the bar right there. At departure time the Colonel was out front to hand the ladies in again and to crack his jest . . .

Dr Burke had never seen anyone with Fry’s facility in accommodating himself to the varied dispositions of his guests. He was not only a pal to the bar-flies, he was a brother to the invalids; indeed, he always found time to call on the sick either in the hotel or in the cabins . . . He told them funny stories, of which he collected so many that he finally had to keep a list in his pocket, which he was forced to consult when his memory failed him. Burke’s prescription for dyspeptics was to spend a week with Fry and either laugh themselves to death or back to health.

But his best parts were played in the dining room and the ballroom. Mealtimes, with his chunky body enveloped in a blue and white checked pinafore, he stationed himself at the side table with a great knife and carved the roasts; ham, venison and mutton. He skipped back and forth between the side table and the main table, bringing the ladies their helpings, changing their plates. Whenever a lady arose from the table to leave the room, "he was instantly at her side, armed with the carving knife in his right hand, and presenting his left arm in his most insinuating manner to conduct her to the door." Some ladies got up and left the room when there was not call for them to do so, just for the fun of the thing. Kentucky ladies.

The ballroom was circled by wooden benches. At one end sat the music, a lone Negro fiddler who not only played his scant repertoire at night be scratched around the place like a ubiquitous katydid in the daytime. Colonel Fry had a son, George, who assisted in the management, and shortly after the business of eating was over for the day, both father and son posted themselves in the ballroom. Every lady as she entered was "whipped up by one of them" and taken over to a bench, often a little bewildered. As soon as there were enough guests on hand for a quadrille the masters of ceremonies arranged the sets; when it came to making up their own they pounced, as a matter of policy, on stiff, newly-arrived females who needed shaking down.

The Frys were enthusiastic dancers. They performed meticulously every curtsy, every turn, every toe-pointing, the back and forth movement, the wheels right and left and then added something of their very own. The embroidery that the elder man got in with his short legs was remarkable. Though he was in his middle fifties he was till the better man of the two at leg-work. This he admitted; his son, he said, was not match for him in the old dances, though he acknowledged the boy's superiority in the modern evolutions. Every evening before the ball closed the Colonel performed the pas seul for which he was famous; he cut the pigeon-wing.

That leg-work looked pretty comical, particularly as it came from a professional funny man, but a guest might easily be fooled that way. Minuets and quadrilles were not funny with him, they were serious business and a frivolous partner soon found it out. Let her try to pass a few remarks over her shoulder or let her slight her own leg-work and the Colonel would bounce to her side and set up such a clapping close to her ears that she soon enough got down to business. He could play the clown in the bar or in the parlor but in the dance he was a martinet and he enforced a proper respect for his art. By the time they came to the place for the grand whirl his partners were so disciplined that they were set and ready for anything, which was just as well, for the Colonel nearly whirled their skirts off.

It was a warming hospitality; it shook some to the stiffness out of the strangers, particularly the New Englanders and the Britishers. Right away, at the very first resort they came to, they were treated to a dancing landlord who was also, it appeared, something of a gentlemen and of good Revolutionary stock. It was very disarming. It was said the ladies soon discarded the heavy armor in which they arrived, unlaced and let down. By their second day Fry's gallantries had taken the starch out of them.

Also, there was the pool. There rigidity and tension melted away. It was a large hexagonal affair, covered with a hexagonal bathhouse; it was forty feet across and five feet deep, with a gravelly bottom through which the water well up continuously in vast volume, bringing with it little bubbles of gas. It was perfectly clear and just as warm as the human heart. Beginning at five o'clock in the morning the ladies and gentlemen bathed at alternate periods, two hours per sex.

The initiates trumpeted this luxury to the world, mincing no words and groping for more. It was, one said, a reservoir of champagne, a pool of perfect delight, "the most luxurious bath in the world." . . . The bubbles, "creeping up your body, produce titillation the most exquisite, surely, ever felt." And did not Lord Morpeth himself say it beat anything in Europe?

Between Colonel Fry and his pool a guest was certain to be relaxed, unbent, soothed, humored, softened, tickled and enchanted. A taste of that and it didn't matter that things were down at the heel and improvements slow, or that a period of prosperity the owners were inclined to pocket such a rare thing as profits and let their famous lessee get on the best he could.

A Note on Perceval Reniers –

Perceval Francis Reniers (1893-1992) grew up in Pittsburg Pennsylvania. He attended Harvard University, and in 1914 served as an editor of the Harvard Crimson. As a young man he must have pursued a writing career, as evidenced by several newspaper bylines in the 1920's. He married Ashton Woodman in 1924 in New York City. They eventually made their home in Greenbrier county West Virginia. There is no evidence of children. After his wife's death in 1966, he was secondly married to May Boullemet. She died in New Orleans Louisiana in 1977. Perceval Reniers lived to the age of ninety-eight and died in Florida in 1992. He and his first wife are buried in Lewisburg, West Virginia.

Play Is Slated in Virginia By White Sulphur Author

The original play selection of the Virginia Museum Theater in Richmond Va, next Season will be "The Woman From Colchis". The author is Perceval Reniers of White Sulphur Springs . . The author is well known for his recently published novel, "Roses From the South" and for his social history, "The Springs of Virginia". In turning play-wright, he has reverted to his first love in the profession of writing. At Harvard, he was a member of the famous playwriting course call "English 47" taught by the late Professor George P Baker, and was for three years stage manager of the equally famous "47 Workshop" where his first full-length play "The Pirates of Paradise" was produced. In 1923 Reniers came to West Virginia as director of the Kanawha Players of Charleston. The following year he married Miss Ashton Fitzhugh Woodman of Charleston and returned to New York to do freelance writing. He and his wife have lived in White Sulphur Springs since 1929.

[source] Beckley Post Herald (Beckley, West Virginia; 1 June 1962.

Do you want to know more?

[Link to John Fry in the database](#)

About the Photo:

Warm Springs – Bath County Virginia (caption); about 1840; Miriam and Ira D. Wallach
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from another source : “Edward Beyer’s print of Warm Springs published in 1857.”

**John Fry, Warm Springs, and Perceval Reniers, compiled by Pamela Hutchison Garrett for
the Family Stories website; 2018.**