

The Mountain Top Hotel

A Popular Stage Stop and Mountain Resort at Rockfish Gap



An early photo of the Mountain Top Hotel by Joseph Clem

Many large stagecoach inns were situated close to, or on the way to, Virginia's famous mineral springs, whose waters were thought to have curative powers. The wealthy and socially inclined would travel great distances over very rough roads to get to these springs where they would spend several months at a time. Although some of the inns were open year-round, most were open just during the warm summer months to accommodate visitors who came to stay there.

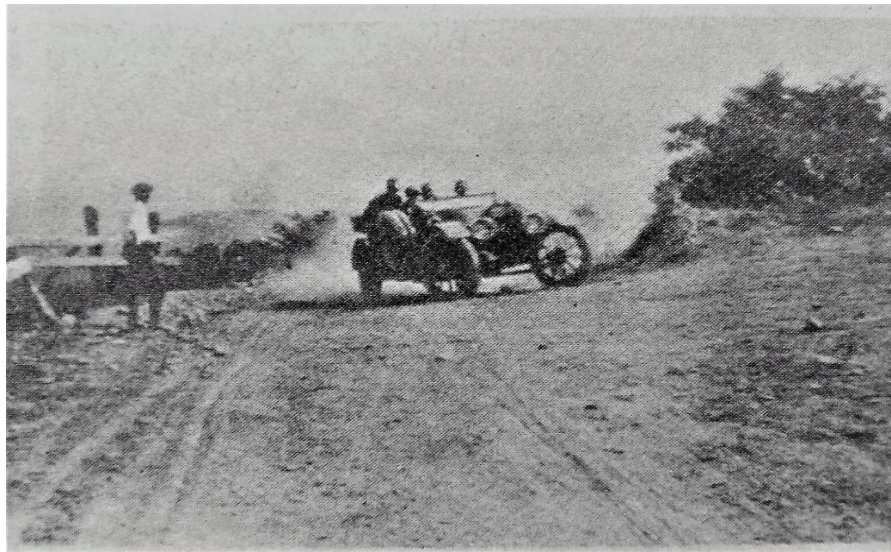
White, Green and Red Sulphur Springs, Orkney Springs, Warm Springs, Old Sweet Springs, Hot Springs, Healing Springs, Sweet Chalybeate Springs and Berkley Springs were just a few of the more famous resorts. The inns located near these resorts were large, with some boasting over one hundred rooms available to rent for the summer season. In addition to the healing waters, the inns also offered fancy parties with dancing, gambling, and horse racing to entertain guests.

Long before Waynesboro's Hotel Brandon and the Brunswick Inn were built, there was a beautiful stagecoach inn higher up on the mountain, located a little west of Rockfish Gap. Mountain Top Hotel, which was also known as Mountain Top Inn or Tavern, served tourists from the lowlands seeking cool relief from the hot, muggy temperatures of the Tidewater areas. People on their way to the springs further west would stop for the night or spend several days recouping

from their travels at the Inn. Others would make the Mountain Top Hotel their final destination, enjoying the cool mountain air and breathtaking views of the Valley below.

At that time, travel was by stagecoach, carriage, horseback, or on foot, across the “highway” (present route 250) that cut across the Blue Ridge Mountains from Charlottesville to Staunton. Railroad travel came later. Prior to, and during the construction of the tunnel under Rockfish Gap, stationary engines were used to move rail traffic across the mountain grade, a few cars at a time, no doubt adding to the Inn’s guest list.

Early roads were rough and hazardous. Hairpin or horseshoe turns were the names old timers assigned to this part of the US 250, on the east side of the Blue Ridge Mountains near Waynesboro.



The top photo was taken about 1915, before the road was paved and the car was headed west towards Waynesboro. The other direction led to Afton and points east. About twenty years later (bottom view) the turn looked like this. Photo was taken by the Hiserman Studio. Just out of view

on the road towards Waynesboro, is Blue Ridge Terrace Inn, now apartments. Twenty years after this, US 250 was straightened out and traffic now proceeds directly northeast as it moves away from Waynesboro. This turn still exists, however, if you chose to turn off US 250 onto old Va. 6 and go into the village of Afton.

Although the exact date that the inn pictured at top is not known, it was said that on the original “Rockfish Inn” site was a large stone house, erected in 1770, and later incorporated into the structure pictured in the Joseph Clem photograph above. It is not known if it was the original Rockfish Inn or the Mountain Inn that was host to the historic 1818 meeting of Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe and John Marshall as they debated



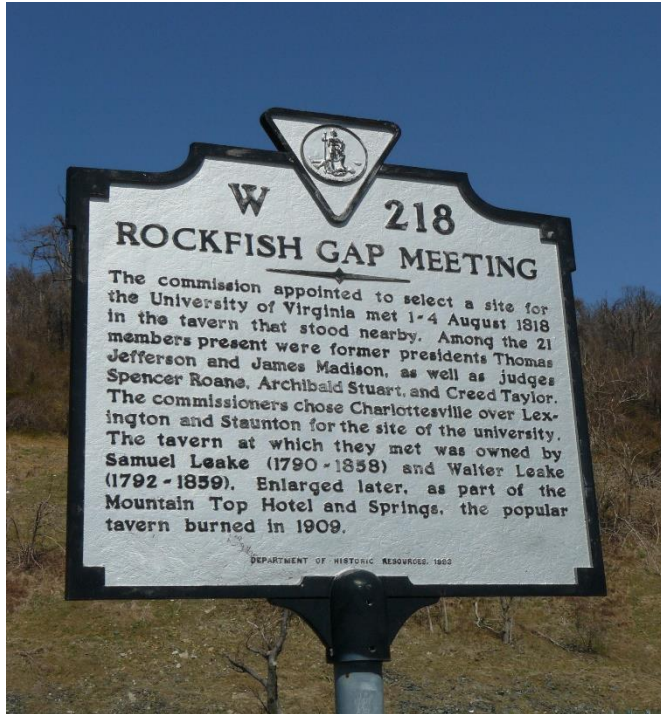
Another early view of US 250 from a postcard

where the University of Virginia was to be located. A small brochure advertising the Mountain Top Inn related that in the parlor of the stone house, three presidents of the United States met with other distinguished Virginians to select a site for the University. The brochure carried an account of the meeting written by Professor M. Schele DeVere which is quoted verbatim:

“High up in the Blue Ridge, at an elevation from which the eye takes in at a single glance a variety of scenes unequalled on the Continent for beauty and loveliness, a little river rises in a dark gorge, to fall gently from terrace to terrace, and after a brief and rapid course, abounding with falls and cascades of infinite attractiveness, to pour its waters into the James River. As the mountains here sink to a lower level, and thus afford one of the passes through which in older days, immigrants passed from what is called the Piedmont Region of the State to the great Valley of Virginia, the place has received the idiomatic name of Rockfish Gap.”

“Here, at a modest country inn, unpretending in appearance, but offering an abundant and well-served table, far from the turmoil of cities and the excitement of politics, met a party of men remarkable for their ability and virtue amidst a people which had already given four Presidents to the Union, and was much known to possess as much private as public worth.”

“In the low-ceiled, white-washed room, the whole furniture of which consisted of a dining room table and rude split-bottom chairs of home make, sat the President of the United States, Mr. Monroe, and two of his predecessors, Mr. Madison and Mr. Jefferson, besides a number of Judges and eminent statesman. ‘Yet,’ says one of the Mr. Jefferson’s biographers, ‘it was remarked by the lookers-on that Mr. Jefferson was the principal object of regard both to the members and the spectators.’ He first exhibited to the board an imposing list of octogenarians who were still living in his neighborhood, and thus proved more conclusively than all reasoning could have done the remarkable salubrity of the climate of Albemarle...and thanks to these practical proofs of the



Rockfish Gap Meeting Marker

Messrs. Massie & Co. of Afton were listed as operators of the Inn, which was located at 1,996 feet above sea level. The facility was one and a half miles from Afton, two miles from Basic City and three miles from Waynesboro. Basic City was served by both the C&O and N&W railroad lines. There were many “bold and pure freestone springs,” and water from a fine Chalybeate Spring was said to have medicinal properties. Because of these amenities, many tourists chose to stay at the Mountain Top Hotel instead of traveling further west.

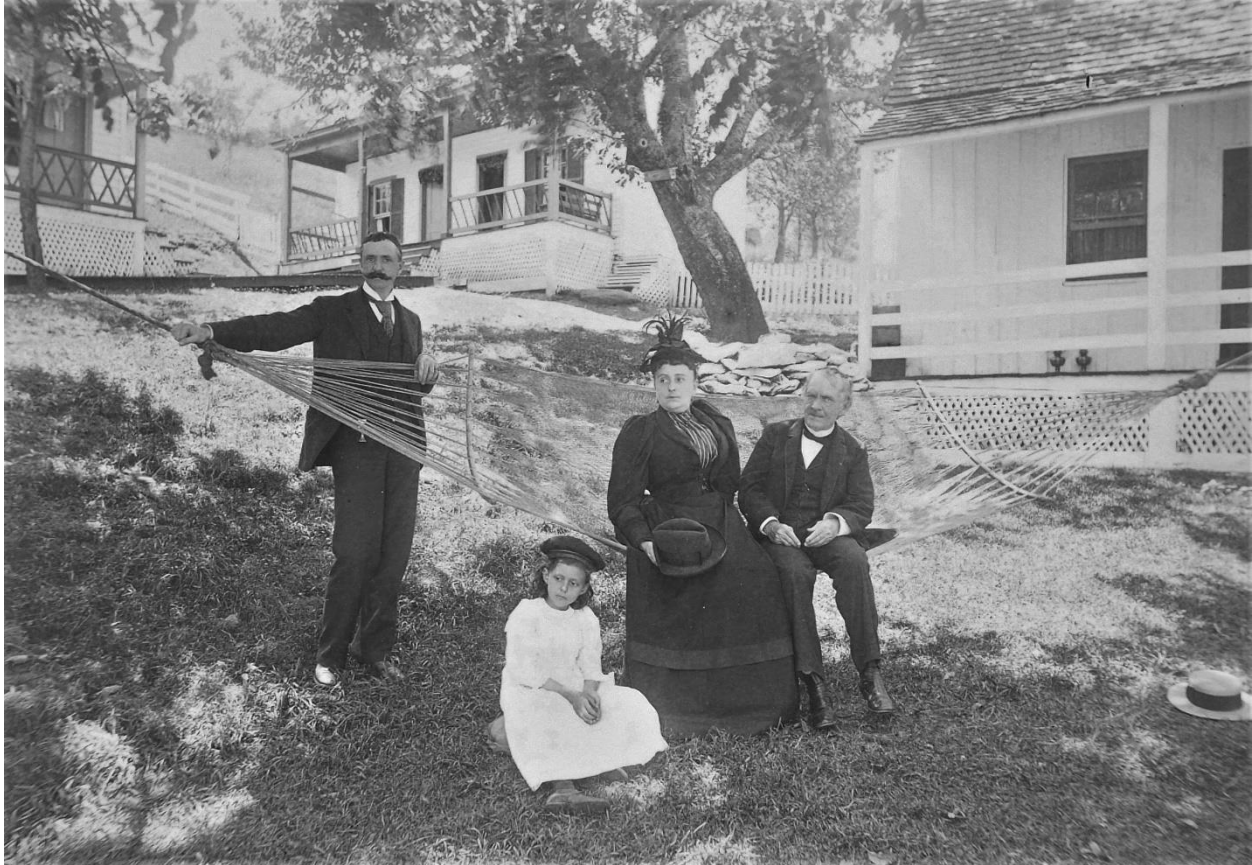


Early painting by Edward Beyer entitled, Rockfish Gap and the Mountain House

wisdom of his choice, and the almost paramount prestige which his name exercised on the Commissioners, they agreed the Central College should be hereafter the University of Virginia.

The 4 x 5-inch brochure had eight pages and was printed by Everett Waddey Co., with publication date of 1892. The main title is “Mountain Top Hotel and Springs” and in the lower right corner, in small type, are the words “Rockfish Inn, 1770.” The inner title page repeats the words below: “Immediately over the Blue Ridge Tunnel.” The tunnel was completed just prior to the Civil War and it seems likely the brochure was published sometime after that and before the mountain structure burned in 1903.

In the above painting by Edward Beyer, The Mountain Top Hotel (on left) was situated adjacent to the former Howard Johnson's restaurant and Skyline Parkway Motor Court at the top of Afton Mountain, facing toward Waynesboro and the valley below. A train can be seen in the distance with the railroad tracks snaking down the mountain. The small structure to the extreme right was where the train stopped and passengers could disembark and walk to the hotel or arrange transportation to it.



On left: Eugene Massie, his sister Mrs. Carrie Pleasants, Mr. James Pleasants (unknown girl)

From the spring of 1854 until the opening of the Blue Ridge Tunnel in 1958, the Virginia Central Railroad operated a temporary rail line from as The Mountain Top Tract that began near Brooksville at the eastern foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Specially-designed steam locomotives navigated the eight mile of temporary track four times daily, pulling three or four rail cars of mail, passengers, baggage and freight at a safe average speed of 6-1/2 miles per hour.

Rates for the Inn were listed as \$2.50 per day or \$12.00 per week. A 28-day month was either \$35.00 or \$40.00, while children over two and under ten years of age were half-price. There were over 300 acres of land at the facility and the Inn with its six cottages could handle 130 guests.

Like so many other stately structures of that time, the Mountain Top Hotel, with its prestigious clientele and numerous amenities, was destroyed by fire. The Afton House, another similar facility, located a little east of the Mountain Inn, survived until 1963 when it suffered the same fate.

Phil James was kind enough to send me a newspaper clipping from The Richmond Times Dispatch, dated Tuesday, September 22, 1903, giving a detailed account of the fire that destroyed the Mountain Top Hotel. In many other accounts, the writers have incorrectly dated the ill-fated fire to the year 1909. This may have occurred partly because the dates 1903 and 1909 can be easily switched on a somewhat blurry or smudged page. The following is the Richmond news clip:

MOUNTAIN TOP BURNED

Historic Hotel Totally Destroyed Yesterday

OWNED BY RICHMOND MAN

**The Loss About \$12,000 and Insurance
Considerably less—Place Where Many
Great Men Had Gathered.**

Hundreds of people in this and other States will hear with regret of the burning of the hotel at Mountain Top, near Afton. Flames said to have originated from a defective terra cotta flue completely destroyed the old and new portions of the hotel Sunday afternoon, entailing a loss estimated to be about \$12,000 on the owner, Mr. Eugene C. Massie, of this city. The insurance is stated to be \$7,000. The old portion of the building was one of the most historic in the state, and its burning is a distinct loss to the entire Commonwealth. Mr. Massie is not in the city. He was in Albemarle County at the time of the fire and has probably gone up to Mountain Top. His brother, Mr. William R. Massie did not know for how much the building was insured, but knew his brother carried some protection on it.

Defective Flue.

The following special, under the date of Monday, September 21, was received last night from Charlottesville:

“Mountain Top Hotel, the property of Eugene C. Massie of Richmond, and one of the best-known resorts in this section of the State, was destroyed by fire on yesterday afternoon at 3 o'clock, the loss being estimated at \$12,000 and the insurance given officially at \$7,000.

“The blaze caught from a terra cotta pipe in the rear of the hotel and quickly spread. Nearly all the furniture in the house was saved by splendid efforts on the part of residents of the community, but their efforts were fruitless in saving the building.

“Mountain Top is one of the most historic hostelries in Virginia. At this inn Thomas Jefferson met with James Madison, James Monroe, Joseph J. Cabell and Phillip St. George in consultation as to whether or not the University of Virginia should be established at Charlottesville or at Lexington, on the present site of Washington and Lee University.

“Here also the Virginia lawmakers met, after Tarleton's raid on Monticello, and his subsequent visit to this city. From Mountain Top was started the first engine that was pulled over the Blue Ridge Mountains by means of horses and which ran between Waynesboro and Mechum's River.”

The Mountain Top Hotel site is about a mile and a half from Afton Station, on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway. It is twenty-two miles west of Charlottesville. Two buildings constituted the main hotel. The older, a stone structure, was erected in about 1770. For many years it was the old Rockfish Inn.

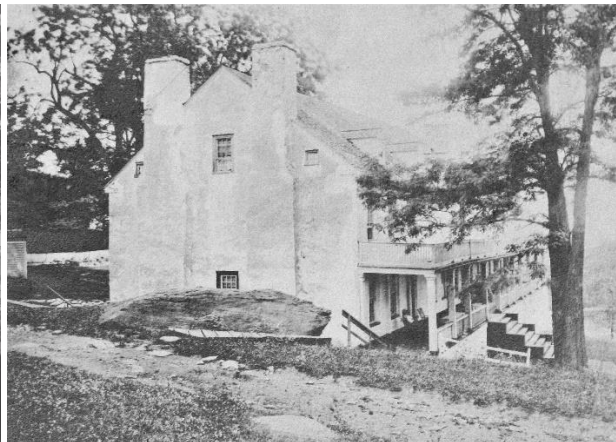
Here plans for the University of Virginia were discussed, and here hundreds of the men who made history in the early days of the republic were guests from time to time. The Inn was directly on the great western turnpike, over which the tide of travel from Virginia into Kentucky and the west flowed, and many were the characters, strong and rugged, who stopped there overnight. Thousands of people from almost every State have been guests there in recent years, and they will feel a keen regret at its destruction. Doubtless Mr. Massie will rebuild, but this cannot be learned officially."



A view from the hotel porch looking north: pond in center of photo behind a small structure
In 1969, when I-64 came through Afton Mountain, the pond was filled in (see next page)



The rear of the Mountain Top Hotel



Side view of the hotel with double chimneys

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE REPORT		FILE NUMBER: 7-36
County: Augusta Locality:	Name: Mountain Top Inn	
Original Owner: Paul family Present Owner: Va Dept Highways Address: Tenant: Attitude of Owner:	Apparent nature and period: 18th century	
DESCRIPTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:		Accession Number:
<p>The site of Mountain Top Inn, in Rockfish Gap, where the U of Va was founded, is being covered by the I64 development.</p> <p><i>the pond which once adjoined the Inn is now filled by I64.</i></p>		CONDITION OF THE SITE: Erosion _____ Cultivation _____ Encroachment _____ Destruction: _____ PRIORITIES: Preserve _____ Lease _____ Salvage _____ Abandon _____
Use reverse side or separate sheet if more space is needed		
USGS sheet: Waynesboro East 7.5	Site collections held by:	
SKETCH MAP (cite historic structures) Indicate North	Photograph files:	
	Drawings:	
Informant: Robert W. Harvill	Name, address and title of recorder	
Documentation	Heite 1 July 69 Date surveyed	

VIRGINIA HISTORIC LANDMARKS COMMISSION ARCHAEOLOGY OFFICE

1969 Virginia Archaeological Site Report, filling in the hotel pond when I-64 came through

For those who think global warming is just a political ruse, here are the mean daily temperatures on Afton Mountain for June, July, and August of 1890, respectively: 72.24, 71.64, and 59.40. For June and July, 1891, it was, respectively, 69.5 and 64.7. A far cry from today's warmer summer temperatures.



The cottages to the side of the hotel



“Mountain Top” with hills to the south: left top of mountain where old Holiday Inn was located



Circa 1890: Top right shows Eugene Massie & Mr. & Mrs. James Pleasants (sister Carrie)



Early photo of guests posing on a rock pile. Notice woman holding hat from Afton winds



A commanding view looking towards Waynesboro. Notice smoke from train in distance



Front view facing the hotel with cottages along the left side of photo

“The End”



A young couple taking a stroll down a wooded trail

Oh, to have been present in the 1800s to have seen or been a part of the opulence and affluence these grand old inns afforded those wealthy enough to enjoy them. Below is the 1892 Mountain Top Hotel brochure that was reprinted in 1969 with permission by Robert Harvell.

Information and early photos were taken from the Days of Yore column in the News Virginian with permission by Curtis L. Bowman, Sr., author; and from the extensive archives of friend and fellow writer, Phil James of Crozet, who is always so gracious in sharing his historical information; and from the Frances Scruby Collection, courtesy of the Augusta County Historical Society, as well as Nancy Sorrells, President of the Augusta County Historical Society, who provided information from an early brochure of the Mountain Top Inn and a 1969 Archaeological site report about filling in the hotel pond when I-64 came through Afton Mountain.



Mountain Top
Hotel and
Springs

Rockfish Inn, 1878.

Mountain Top Hotel and Springs

Immediately over the "Blue Ridge Tunnel."

ROCKFISH GAP, BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAINS,
VIRGINIA.



Accessible from the NORTH, SOUTH, EAST and WEST, by the CHESAPEAKE AND OHIO
and NORFOLK AND WESTERN RAILWAY SYSTEMS.

ONE MILE AND A HALF from Afton, Nelson County, Va., on the C. & O. R. R.

THREE MILES from Waynesboro, Augusta County, Va., on the C. & O. R. R.

TWO MILES from Basic City, the Junction of N. & W. and C. & O. R. R.'s

SITUATED 1,996 feet above the level of the sea, and commanding on either side of the
Blue Ridge grand panoramas of Mountain and Valley Scenery, visible from
many delightful walks. Many bold and pure FREESTONE SPRINGS
and a fine, strong CHALYBEATE SPRING of excellent
medicinal properties, constitute the waters.

Mountain Top—Rockfish Inn.

THIS WELL-KNOWN SUMMER RESORT is immediately on the old turnpike between Charlottesville and Staunton, which was in the early days of the Commonwealth the first great highway upon which travel and traffic made their way to the Far West. It was over this route that the march of emigration to Kentucky and the Great West took place. The first building erected here was a massive stone house, which now forms a part of the Hotel. Its foundation dates back about one hundred and twenty years, and it has been made memorable by an event not to be forgotten. In the room now used as the parlor, in the year 1818 met three Presidents of the United States—Mr. Jefferson, Mr. Madison and Mr. Monroe, together with a number of other distinguished Virginians, Commissioners appointed by the Governor to select a site for the University of Virginia.

In describing this event an eminent author, Prof. M. SCHELE DE VERE, of that Institution, says:

“ High up in the Blue Ridge, at an elevation from which the eye takes in at a single glance a variety of scenes unequalled on this Continent for beauty and loveliness, a little

[2]



MAIN BUILDING

river rises in a dark gorge, to fall gently from terrace to terrace, and after a brief and rapid course, abounding with falls and cascades of infinite attractiveness, to pour its waters into James River. As the mountains here sink to a lower level, and thus afford one of the passes through which in older days immigrants passed from what is called the Piedmont Region of the State to the great Valley of Virginia, the place has received the idiomatic name of Rockfish Gap. Here, at a modest country inn, unpretending in appearance, but offering an abundant and well-served table, far from the turmoil of cities and the excitement of politics, met a party of men remarkable for their ability and virtue amidst a people which had already given four Presidents to the Union, and was well known to possess as much private as public worth. In the low-ceiled, white-washed room, the whole furniture of which consisted of a dining-room table and rude 'split bottom' chairs of home make, sat the President of the United States, Mr. Monroe, and two of his predecessors, Mr. Madison and Mr. Jefferson, besides a number of judges and eminent statesmen. 'Yet,' says one of Mr. Jefferson's biographers, 'it was remarked by the lookers-on that Mr. Jefferson was the principal object of regard both to the members and the spectators.' . . . He first exhibited to the board an imposing list of octogenarians who were still living in his neighborhood, and thus proved more conclusively than all reasoning could have done the remarkable salubrity of the climate of Albemarle. . . . And thanks to these practical proofs of the wisdom of his choice, and the almost paramount prestige which his name exercised on the Commissioners, they agreed that Central College should be hereafter the 'University of Virginia.'— See Semi-Centennial Catalogue of the University of Virginia.]

Nearly half a century later, quite a different gathering took place around the old inn, when amidst these varied "scenes unequalled on this Continent for beauty and loveliness," there rang out the "stern alarums"

of "grim-visaged war," and the Blue and the Gray were mingled in deadly combat.

In the year 1864, when General Early was retreating from "Cedar Run," the troops of General Sheridan in large force, who were seeking a passage across the Blue Ridge to ravage the fertile plains of Albemarle, were gallantly repulsed by a small band of Early's troops at the western mouth of the tunnel, and driven back from that point through Waynesboro to Staunton or its neighborhood. And on the high hill forming the Southern slope of "Rockfish Gap," in which the "Mountain Top" Hotel is situated, and which is a part of the property, and the main chain of the Blue Ridge Mountains, there may still be distinctly seen a line of Confederate redoubts, seven in number, erected to guard this historic pass.

The following quotation from the cultivated pen of a former guest is made by permission :

"One of the attractions of this delightful spot is its elevated position, 1,996 feet above the sea level. All mountain heights are cool and salubrious, but from the peculiar configuration of the Gap in which Mountain Top is situated, this place is always under the influence of currents of bracing air from every quarter. This accounts for the invigorating effect of the atmosphere upon invalids here seeking health. . . . Another attraction consists in the varied and extensive views accessible to the feeblest of invalids. Within a few hundred yards, on either side of the Gap, looking both to the east and to the west, lie spread

out picturesque valleys and hills, presenting every phase of beauty to be found in a region where mountains are heaped upon mountains, and plains lie basking in the lights and shadows of a summer's sun. Even from the windows and porticos of the hotel and cottages panoramas of uncommon extent delight the eye of the beholder. A number of beautiful walks invite the visitor to seek exercise in the open air, and this luxury can be indulged without undue exertion or too great fatigue. The invalid finds places of rest accommodated to his strength, and often discovers by daily practice his fancied ailments gradually disappearing with the silent return of his strength and energy.

The whole property contains about three hundred acres, and the present hotel and six cottages accommodate about one hundred and thirty guests.

A record of temperature has been kept for some years and shows that the mean day temperature for the months of June, July and August, 1890, was, respectively, 72.24, 71.64 and 59.40. For the months of June and July, 1891, it was, respectively, 69.5 and 64.7.

THIS SUMMER RESORT affords every inducement to the Invalid, the Tourist and the Pleasure Seeker.

EXCURSIONS may be made in a day to many attractive places, such as

The Natural Bridge,
The Grottoes,
The Miller Institute,

Luray Caverns,
Humpback Mountain,
University of Virginia,

And MONTICELLO, the Home of Jefferson.

Objects of Interest in Sight

THE Ragged Mountains, the South-West Mountains, and portions of Rockfish Valley and Piedmont Valley, the Observatory at the University of Virginia, the Miller Manual Labor School, Basic City, Waynesboro, Staunton, Massanutten Mountain, and portions of Luray Valley and Shenandoah Valley in the Valley of Virginia, the North Mountains, the first Range of the Alleghanies, and sections of the Chesapeake and Ohio and the Shenandoah Valley Railways.

ON THE EAST lies the lovely ROCKFISH VALLEY, a glimpse of which is caught by the traveler as the East-bound train on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway dashes out of the Blue Ridge Tunnel; and on this side may also be seen an extensive section of the exquisite "PIEDMONT VALLEY," stretching to the limits of the distant horizon.

ON THE WEST lies the great VALLEY OF VIRGINIA, between the Blue Ridge and the Alleghanies, spreading with quiet charm and varied luxuriance as far as the eye can reach. Here flows the South Fork of the limpid Shenandoah; and the historic MASSANUTTEN RANGE is prominent in the landscape.

TERMS



Per Day,	\$ 2.50
Per Week,	12.00
Per Month of 28 Days, \$35.00 and 40.00	



according to location ; double rooms to be occupied by not less than two persons, or paid for at double rates.

Children over two and under ten years of age, and nurses, half price.

Comfortable Wall Tents, nicely floored, may be had if applied for in time.

Leave the train at AFTON, only one hundred and twenty miles from Richmond and one hundred and forty miles from Washington. Visitors leaving New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, Norfolk or Richmond in the morning, arrive at Mountain Top the same day.

TELEGRAPH OFFICE AND POST OFFICE AT AFTON.

Dr. A. C. FOX, of Waynesboro, will be the attending physician.

Address,

Messrs. MASSIE & CO.,

AFTON, VIRGINIA.