

CULTURE

'I can't make the town stay there'

A bill would 'terminate' the Lee County town of St. Charles, which has seen its population dwindle since the coal boom of the 1940s.



by **Megan Schnabel**

January 26, 2022



The Lee County town of St. Charles was created in 1914. It's likely to be returned to the county this year. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

ST. CHARLES – There are a lot of used-to-be's in the town of St. Charles.

The vacant building with its windows covered by sheets of metal used to be a candy store. The brick building next door used to be the sewing factory. The black lung clinic used to be a hardware store.

There used to be a bowling alley, a hotel, a Kroger, a Piggly Wiggly, a firehouse. Clothing stores. Movie theaters. Restaurants. A couple of beer halls. Dozens of taxi cabs. A bus to Pennington Gap.

There used to be thousands of people living in and around the Lee County town, miners and their families and the people who owned the businesses that catered to them. On Saturdays, there used to be so many cars parked along the narrow main street and so many people crowding the sidewalks that it felt like a slice of New York City.

But in the coming months, St. Charles is likely to add another used-to-be to its list: It will become a used-to-be town. Lee County officials are asking the General Assembly to “terminate” the town, in the blunt language of the bill filed earlier this month.

“It’s just a tough decision,” said Dennis “DD” Leonard, who’s in his second term as county supervisor for the district that includes St. Charles.

Map by Robert Lunsford.

“I really hated to be part of that call, because I hated to see them lose it.

“I think I would have definitely opposed it, if I thought there was any way possible that there would’ve been some interest and things could’ve been reversed and turned positive over there,” he said. “But I just don’t think there’s any way forward for them. I think they’re best suited to be brought on into the county.”

The last census counted just 73 people in St. Charles, down 43% from 2010, when the town had 128 residents.

The once-bustling commercial buildings have burned down or stand vacant.

No one has run for town council – or voted – in the last two town elections.

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“It’s still a lot of good people in St. Charles, but most of them are baby boomers, got a little age on them, got a little sickness,” said Teresa Webb, whose husband worked in the mines and whose extended family lives in and around St. Charles. “I don’t fault them for that. They just can’t really do much no more.”

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On Nov. 5, 1913, just a few years after the first coal mines opened in Lee County, 20 residents of a community called St. Charles asked the court to make them a town.

“Petitioners represent that it would be to the best interest of the inhabitants of the town to have said community incorporated, and that the general good of the community will be promoted thereby,” the petition read.

Two months later, on Jan. 10, 1914, by order of Judge H.A.W. Skeen, the town came into being.

The community's population at the time was about 300, "as nearly as can be ascertained," the petition read.

It was the beginning of the coal boom in Lee County. According to a [1925 report](#) by the U.S. Geological Survey and the University of Virginia, the first mines to open in the county were in the area around St. Charles.

By the end of 1910, eight coal companies were producing large quantities of coal for shipment. By the time the report was written 15 years later, Lee County was home to "a number of large mining operations ... with mines modern and fully equipped in every respect."

Companies including Virginia Lee, Blue Diamond, Black Mountain and Benedict were putting hundreds – and eventually thousands – of men to work in the growing business of coal extraction.

The companies built coal camps where the men could live with their families. The camps offered commissaries where groceries and appliances could be purchased for company scrip. Some of the camps had their own elementary schools and movie theaters.

St. Charles was centrally located to the camps, and as the coal business grew, so did the town. Banks and grocery stores opened, and a fleet of taxi cabs sprang up to carry passengers between the coal camps and the town. St. Charles had a town council and supported a fire department and a police force. Kids could go all the way through high school without having to leave town.

By most accounts, the 1940s and '50s were the town's heyday, with businesses lining the narrow main street and houses reaching up onto the hills flanking the two sides of the town.

The town hit its peak population in the late 1940s; the 1950 U.S. Census put St. Charles at 550 residents.

Richard Hubbard grew up on the outskirts of St. Charles. He remembers being sent to the grocery store to buy a gallon of milk one Saturday, and having to walk in the road because the sidewalks were so crowded.

"The saying was in the '40s and early '50s, if you could drive through St. Charles on the weekend, you could drive anywhere in the world," he said.

But it was close-knit, despite the bustle.

“It was a good community to grow up in,” he said. “Just about anybody, if you went in their house, had a pot of beans and a big old skillet full of cornbread and would expect you to eat if it was mealtime. It was an open community.”

A couple of beer joints catered to the miners and the townsfolk, and things could get rowdy on Saturday nights, said Terra McDavid, who grew up just outside St. Charles and has spent years researching the town’s history. The town logged several murders over the years, she said, including the fatal shooting of a police officer.

Her grandmother, who had visited New York before she died in 1985, used to say that being in St. Charles on a busy weekend was like walking in New York City. “You’d have to move to the side, sometimes even stop, to be able to get through,” McDavid said. “That many people on those little streets.”

She recalled town characters, the ones who went by names like Mainline and Cartwheel, and the man who would sit by the tracks all day (except, she clarified, when he and his buddies were drunk) and record in a book every train that passed through St. Charles.

Her uncle was one of those drinking buddies, she said, and he’d earned the nickname Cartwheel because he’d get drunk and then start turning flips on the tracks.

“Sometimes those characters are the character of the town, and you don’t realize it until it’s too late,” she said.

The St. Charles Community Health Clinic and the adjacent black lung clinic, operated by Stone Mountain Health Services, are the only businesses that remain in town. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

No one ran for town council, or voted, in St. Charles in the 2018 or 2020 elections.

In 2016, seven people were on the ballot, all with the same last name, according to the Virginia Department of Elections. A total of 47 votes were cast for six town council candidates. The top vote-getter in the mayoral race got eight votes. None of the seven was ever sworn in, said Dane Poe, Lee County's administrator.

The elections are what finally forced a decision about St. Charles; even if no one turns out to vote, the county still has to hold, and pay for, elections, Poe said. But well before that, he said he'd been thinking about what should happen to the town, and he had come to the conclusion that it needed to be folded back into the county.

For Poe, it was personal. He'd grown up just outside St. Charles. His dad ran a store in town from the mid-1950s through the '70s, when he sold it to Poe's sister. Poe worked in the store growing up, and he attended St. Charles schools.

He's been watching the town's population decline and its commercial core wither for decades, as the coal booms of the 1940s and '70s faded into history and people moved away in search of jobs.

In the 1960s, he figures there were still 20 or so businesses operating in St. Charles.

Today, the only commercial enterprises in town are the St. Charles Community Health Clinic and the adjacent black lung clinic, both operated by Stone Mountain Health Services.

It's been quite a while since the town sent out property tax bills, Poe said. It wouldn't have generated much money anyway, he said; a lot of what's in the town is nonprofit or otherwise not taxable, like churches and the post office.

"There's not much revenue there to run a town," he said.

The county treasurer's office is sitting on about \$18,000 in county sales tax revenue that should go to the town, Poe said. "But they have no post office box, and nobody to go check the box if they did, to pick the check up," he said.

Old Dominion Power Co. has called him numerous times, wanting to know what to do with utility tax revenue that's due to the town.

The challenges just kept mounting, he said.

About a decade ago, a couple of town council members left the town checkbook in Poe's office, saying they were done with it, and he could have it. The county attorney persuaded them to take it back, Poe said.

"I've toyed with some of this for a few years," he said. "I didn't want to drag the supervisors into it because I didn't want them to be vilified. It wasn't that they wanted it to happen, it was just something that was going to need to happen, eventually. The election deal has just pushed it to that point.

“There’s been no structure or no real organization to the town in 10 years or more. And so, where do you start?”

But it turned out that closing the books on St. Charles wouldn’t be as simple as the county had hoped.

According to a list [of town charters](#) compiled by the state, St. Charles is one of just 37 towns in Virginia – out of 154 – to be created by circuit court order rather than through government channels.

St. Charles never received a charter from the General Assembly; whether that was unusual in the early 1900s is unclear, although today it would be required by state law.

It had never really mattered – until now.

Now, there’s no town council to petition the Lee County Circuit Court to disband the town, and the county doesn’t have standing to make that request. That’s why the county has taken the issue to its General Assembly delegation.

Sen. Todd Pillion, R-Washington County, and Del. Terry Kilgore, R-Scott County, introduced legislation that would bring an end to St. Charles and turn over to the county any property – or debts – held by the town. The bill has been referred to committees in both houses.

Leonard, the county supervisor, said his goal is to see that any money that comes to Lee County from St. Charles be earmarked for the community.

None of his constituents called him with concerns about the process, he said. Nor has he heard from his fellow supervisors about any complaints.

“Nobody’s contacted me with any negativity, as far as that goes,” he said. “Or positive. It’s never brought up. There’s just not a whole lot of interest.”

It’s the end of an era in some ways, Poe said.

“You don’t see a town disappear that often, have the charter done away with,” he said. “But it’s time. We just reached that point. Other than in name, that’s about the only identity it has anyway right now. I hate it. That’s still where I’m from. But I can’t make the town stay there.”

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Other than the cars pulling in and out of the health clinic, and a few people checking for mail at the post office, downtown St. Charles is quiet on a near-freezing January morning. The road through St. Charles dead-ends at a couple of mine sites; there's only one way in and out of town, so there aren't many people just passing through.

Webb and her daughter, Rhonda Webb, are at the St. Charles Community Center, which they open on Wednesday and Thursday mornings if the weather allows.

The center, which runs on donations, is housed in what used to be a hardware store and a bath house for miners. It's next door to a now-vacant building that used to be a sewing factory where Rhonda Webb worked for 16 years, making golf shirts, until the business moved away.

She was born and raised in St. Charles, and her family is part of its coal mining heritage; her father was a miner.

A memorial to miners sits across the road from the community center, its bricks displaying the names of men who were lost, and of the residents and local businesses who helped pay for the monument. “In memory and appreciation to all coal miners that worked in St. Charles coal fields,” the central plaque reads.

Webb points to a brick that features her grandparents’ names, and another with her uncle and his wife, and yet another with her cousin. Other bricks carry messages from, and to, the town: “St. Charles a small town with a big heart,” “God bless this town,” “In honor of all Lee County UMWA members.”

The old United Mine Workers of America building is right up the street, “U.M.W. of A. BUILDING” in big block letters still visible, but fading, over the front door. “I remember when I was young, we used to take my Papaw,” Webb said. “He’d come down and stay with us for a few days, and he’d always go to them UMWA meetings.”

Just up from the community center is the rescue squad, housed in what used to be the town hall; the basement in the jail is storage space now.

The squad runs three or four calls a day, said Harold Miller, who drives the ambulance. He lives in Pennington Gap but spends 10 hours a day, five days a week, at the squad hall. He used to work at the fire department, but it shut down a few years back.

“We try to stay up here as much as we can,” said Capt. Jeff Oaks, who took over the squad about seven years ago. “Can’t be here all the time, but we try to stay as much as we can.”

It’s a big improvement from years ago, Rhonda Webb said, when the squad had stopped running ambulance calls and residents had to wait for crews from Pennington Gap when they needed help.

Oaks said when he came to the squad, the coffers were just about empty and the bills were piling up. He wrangled some grants to buy new equipment and help pay for volunteer training.

Last year’s budget was about \$68,000, he said. They got \$10,000 from the county and made up the rest by charging for calls. “If we didn’t bill, we’d sink, he said.

The county bought them a new ambulance recently, at a cost of \$240,000, Oaks said. The squad needs a new EKG machine, but that's \$40,000 that no one seems to have.

Other than the rescue squad, the town doesn't have much infrastructure to speak of these days. Water and sewer are handled by the county's public service authority. Old Dominion turned off the streetlights after the town hadn't paid its bill for about two years, Poe said.

There's a post office that's open half days and, a block away, St. Charles Elementary School, home of the Midgets.

The school has about 130 students in grades pre-K through four, said Kellie Leonard, its principal. It's in the building that used to house St. Charles High School; the lower grades moved into the building after a fire destroyed the elementary school 50-plus years ago, and the high school was consolidated with Pennington Gap. That school later closed in a further round of consolidation; students from St. Charles now go to high school in Jonesville, the county seat.

Poe was one of the students who had to finish his high school years in Pennington. He went on to study accounting at East Tennessee State University, then came back and worked for a couple of coal companies. In the mid-1990s, he took the job with the county.

There are no active coal mines in Lee County now. A couple of years ago, some strip mining was done on the Lee-Wise county border. It was the first coal that had been mined in the county in probably five years, Poe said.

“It's all over – all your old coal towns, most of them are gone,” he said. “Some have reinvented themselves to some extent, but they'll never see the days they saw in the '40s. That was their heyday.”

A small collection of houses is all that remains of what was once a bustling coal camp at Bonny Blue and Pot Branch roads, on the outskirts of St. Charles. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

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The used-to-be St. Charles lives on online.

There's a Facebook page dedicated to the old St. Charles High School, and a St. Charles Virginia Facebook group that McDavid started as a place where St. Charles natives can share memories: snapshots from the Class of '66 reunion, photos of wild horses wandering through town, obituaries, prayer requests.

"It's not to keep it alive for other people as much as to keep it alive for themselves," she said. "They know that town is dying, and they're trying to hold on to what they can. Because that's part of their life. I mean that literally – part of their life.

"A lot of it is abstract for me, because I'm much younger than they are, but they lived it, and I think that's what makes it precious to them," said McDavid, who's 54 and moved out of St. Charles about a dozen years ago. She lives in Big Stone Gap, 20-odd miles away in Wise County.

Hubbard, who's 70 and lives in Pennington Gap now, doesn't expect his three kids to ever move back. "They went where the jobs were," he said – Richmond, Northern Virginia, Knoxville, Tennessee. "I can understand that."

He thinks his dad, who broke his back in a mine when Hubbard's older sister was a baby, purposely pushed him and his four brothers away from the mining business by offering to pay for a year in college.

Hubbard went into the military and got a degree from Clinch Valley College, now the University of Virginia's College at Wise. For years, he was a teacher.

“I get sick every time I drive through St. Charles. If we had been more diversified,” he said, “we would be a thriving community.”

Teresa Webb, who raised her children in St. Charles and is still surrounded by family, said she has no plans to leave, regardless of what happens to the town's legal status.

“It's sad to watch it go down, especially when it's your own town,” she said. “But to me, it's still home.”

POLITICS

'We ask for the opportunity to prove ourselves'

The Wise County town of Pound is in danger of losing its charter after years of what county and state officials have called drama and mismanagement. Some townspeople are fighting back.

by **Megan Schnabel**

March 4, 2022



The Wise County town of Pound is in a battle over its charter. A bill that cleared the General Assembly this week gives residents until November 2023 to, as its sponsor put it, "clean up their act" or lose their town. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

POUND – Cindy Mullins knows what some people think about her town.

She knows that people in Wise County and beyond have watched Pound's livestreamed town meetings, that they've seen the yelling and the name-calling, the council members walking out, the barely veiled animosity brewing between factions of residents and local officials.

"That's the only side of our town that a lot of people see, and unfortunately that's the only side they'll ever know," said Mullins, who grew up here and was hired last year as the town's crime prevention officer.

She wishes that those people knew about the good things she sees: the initiative to collect supplies for foster kids, the police department's community outreach, the way local businesses like the NAPA Auto Parts store support holiday events and car shows.

Specifically, right now she wishes that members of the Virginia General Assembly would be less inclined to punish Pound for, as she put it, "the sins of the father" and more inclined to lend a hand.

"People are coming together like never before to rally around each other and this town," she said. "We have a renewed sense of hope. ... It's a new day. We ask for the opportunity to prove ourselves."

With a bill that has cleared both houses of the state legislature, Pound could be on the verge of losing its charter after dealing with years of problems – a "comedy of errors," as the bill's patron put it – that have come to a head since 2020.

Council members and former town employees have sued each other. The mayor was the subject of a recall petition. The town disbanded its police department and lost its water system. A town bank account was frozen. A town employee was convicted of embezzlement.

So many council members have resigned that the five-seat body hasn't had a quorum since December.

House Bill 904 provides none of this background, just a short description:



Map by Robert Lunsford.

A BILL to repeal Chapter 109, as amended, of the Acts of Assembly of 1984, which provided a charter for the Town of Pound in Wise County.

The bill is intended to be a “stick” to get the town to act, its patron, House Majority Leader Terry Kilgore, R-Scott County, told colleagues at a Feb. 4 House subcommittee meeting; it gives the residents of Pound until next year to “get their house in order,” as he put it, or lose their town.

But residents of Pound – or “The Pound,” as longtime residents call it – and some who live outside the town limits, and even in other parts of the state, have mounted a robust defense. They’re on the cusp of big changes, they contend, and they need help, not censure.

Late Thursday, the judges of the 30th Judicial Circuit appointed three new council members from a pool of submitted names – business owner Kensleigh Browning, former mayor George Dean and lifelong Pound resident Doris Mullins – restoring the quorum and clearing the way for the council to do business again.

“I think you’re going to see a whole different world with us” once the council is fully restored, Leabern Kennedy, one of two current council members, told legislators at a House committee meeting last month in Richmond. The other sitting council member, Glenn Cantrell, declined to be interviewed for this story.

House Majority Leader Terry
Kilgore, R-Scott County

The efforts extend beyond the town council, Pound supporters point out. Mullins and the interim police chief – the town’s only two paid employees at the moment – have spent months trying to restore order to a department that was decimated by the loss of all its officers and embarrassed by a trove of mishandled evidence. There are efforts underway to bring public art to Pound, and to build a kayak launch on the Pound River. Every Thursday night, Pickin’ in the Pound draws musicians and families to Town Hall for food and fellowship.

“A lot of times those things are hidden because they’re overshadowed by all the negativity,” Mullins said.

It might be hard to see Pound’s woes as anything more than the problems that a bickering small town has brought upon itself. But leave out the most dramatic aspects, and the story that’s playing out in Pound isn’t all that different from what has happened in other communities across Appalachia as coal has declined in the region.

Former town council member Marley Green, who has been involved for years with community organizing across the coalfields, said Pound's problems have been more public than what he's seen in other places. But at its core, he believes, is the same story: The coal industry collapses, the population drops, investments decline. Towns lose their tax bases and don't have the money to take care of their utilities or hire and retain qualified staff.

And no one seemed to see it coming or plan for any of it.

“And then when things get hard, people start fighting over what's left,” said Green, who resigned from the council last summer after serving for about a year. “And then you throw in some personal grudges and relationships. It's obviously kind of a unique situation in a lot of ways, but I also think a lot of towns are facing a lot of the same headwinds that could easily tip them into dramatic situations.

“We need more help or things are going to keep getting worse in some of these places.”

lidation in 2011. Its trophies now live at town hall. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

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Kennedy, a Pound lifer who joined the town council after a special election in November, traveled last month to Richmond with Terry Short, a friend and former council member, to tell Pound's story to the legislators who would be voting on its fate.

Her assessment of her town's problems was blunt. But so was her plea that Pound be given an opportunity to heal itself.

“At this point what we're asking for is the chance to fix our house,” she told the House committee. “Our house is a hot mess, I'm not going to lie there. But we're asking for the chance.”

In the last two years, Pound has attracted media attention far beyond what its 2.6 square miles and 877 residents would seem to warrant.

The newly elected mayor was locked out of town hall, and three council members signed a petition to force her from office. The police force was disbanded, the town attorney was fired and sued the town, two town managers quit.

A town employee was convicted of embezzlement. Guns and drugs were found unsecured in the police department.

The town gave up its water and sewer system to the county after allowing untreated wastewater to flow into the Pound River.

Judges removed two council members because they had been improperly appointed. Others refused to come to meetings, or attended but then walked out, or resigned.

Some of the disputes have been centered directly around actions taken, or not taken: the decision to disband the police department, the appointment of council members to fill vacant seats, the mess over the wastewater system.

But undergirding it all seems to be something deeper – the “personal grudges and relationships” that Green cited. And it's that drama, not the systemic problems that so many small towns are facing, that has

garnered so much attention for the small town, and that has driven residents and outsiders alike to tune in to Facebook every time a town meeting is streamed.

Mayor Stacey Carson has been a lightning rod for much of the conflict.

Carson, who moved to Pound in 2006, first ran for mayor six years later on a platform of exposing what she saw as abuses of power. She got 93 votes, just over 32% of the total. She tried again in 2018 and this time pulled 42%. In 2020, the incumbent mayor did not run, and Carson and a write-in candidate each received 60 votes. Carson was declared the winner when her name was pulled from a hat.

Pound's town charter lays out a largely ceremonial role for the mayor – someone who can cast tie-breaking votes but has no real authority. But two former mayors served simultaneously as town manager, giving them a bigger role in town governance and setting a precedent that Carson expected would continue.

Carson, who said she applied for the town manager's job, did not get it.

Over the course of the next few months, tensions rose in town hall. In November, Carson was locked out of the building. In December, a petition calling for Carson's removal was signed by 44 people, including three sitting council members, a previous mayor and the town employee who later would be convicted of embezzlement.

The petition – which went to court but eventually was dismissed – accused Carson of 24 actions, ranging from “engaging in a continuous hostile demeanor” toward town staff, to making “repeated false accusations of criminal conduct” against staff during council meetings, to “unilaterally declaring that she intends to take action as the Mayor whether it's approved by Council or not.”

The morning after the town's February meeting – which drew a dozen or so people, even though it had been a purely informational gathering since there was no council quorum to take any action – Carson sat in her town hall office and said she finds it “very hurtful” that she was denied the opportunity to be town manager.

She's puzzled, and wounded, by what she sees as disrespect for her efforts. It can be hard, she admits, to separate the personal from the political.

“Sad thing is, people don't understand why I care because this isn't my hometown,” she said, tearing up and reaching for a tissue. “But I don't think anybody could tell me that my heart's not here, just like

anybody that was born and raised here.”

Since she became mayor, she said she has put her own time and money into fixing up town hall, and she’s proud of the transformation. She swipes through photos on her phone, showing “before” pictures of her now tidy office – stacks of papers, old furniture, an ashtray filled with cigarette butts in a desk drawer.

There wasn’t money to buy new furniture for the multipurpose room across the hall, she said, so she collected dozens of Pound photos and varnished them onto the tops of some old tables. She and her son cleaned out the kitchen – “We had rodents, bad,” she said – and added homey touches like a rack of aprons for the women who fix meals there. Even the bathrooms got a makeover.

For a town in such great turmoil, a focus on redecorating might seem frivolous. But to Carson, it’s a way to show her love for the town – and to show Pound taxpayers that their investment in the town is paying off.

“I always believe people visually need to see what you’re doing,” she said. “They need to see you out here, they need to see a difference being made, and they need to be able to realize that they can also help make a difference. Each and every person.”

She wants to reopen a town playground that she said has been closed for months. She’s planning a river cleanup as soon as the weather gets warmer. She wants to bring more businesses to town – restaurants, in particular; maybe a music store – but said the inability of the town council to agree on anything has hamstrung her efforts.

Drew Mullins, who served as town manager for about three months in 2021 and had known Carson prior to that, called her “Pound’s biggest cheerleader.” But he also said that she didn’t have the thick skin that politics can require.

“She wears her heart on her sleeve, and it’s wide open, no protection at all,” he said. “And that’s her biggest downfall.”

Mullins, who now is a town manager in Florida, said he left Pound after such a short tenure in part because he felt that he’d finished the job he’d come to do – to deal with the town’s wastewater issues – and in part because of the “absolute animosity” that pervaded the town.

But the turmoil goes well beyond Carson.

Chuck Slep, who was elected commonwealth's attorney of Wise County and Norton in 2015 and held that job until he was named the state's chief deputy attorney general in January, said last month that Pound kept him busy with complaints. Stories in local media from the last several years back that up: His office was asked about where council members lived, about town finances, about allegations of assault, about whether meetings had been properly called.

"I spent more time dealing with the drama of Pound than I did on any single case in the six years," Slep said. "More than murder cases."

He said his practice was to refer complaints to law enforcement to be investigated; with the exception of a case in which a town employee was convicted of embezzlement, he said, none of the complaints turned out to be anything more than rumors or innuendo.

The commonwealth's attorney's office also was drawn into a dispute over the town's police department.

After years of arguments about how much of the town's budget should be spent on its police force – arguments that broke out both on the council and among residents – the council in April 2021 voted to furlough police employees. The next month – in a contentious 3-2 vote that saw Carson as tiebreaker – it disbanded the department altogether and dismissed the two remaining employees.

That created a problem: Who could access the locked evidence room, which was off-limits to anyone who wasn't in law enforcement?

The council hired an interim police chief and agreed to bring in an outside evidence expert from Northern Virginia. They quickly found disarray: unsecured drugs and guns, unserved warrants, evidence that had never been logged.

In July, Slep dropped charges against 31 people who had been investigated by the Pound Police Department.

"As a prosecutor, I always believed that it was my duty to seek justice within the bounds of the law, not merely to seek convictions," Slep said. "Thus, I made the difficult decision to dismiss the criminal charges in these cases. It was necessary because the town council's action regarding the evidence room and police department jeopardized the preservation of evidence in those cases."

Kristin Foley, who moved to Pound in 2017 and had asked to be considered for one of the council vacancies, said it can be hard for an outsider to understand why the seemingly simple concept of a

functioning town government has proven to be such a hurdle in Pound.

There are a lot of residents whose families go back generations, whose blood “runs through these mountains,” she said: There’s a lot of history, and not all of it good.

“There’s a lot of heart, a lot of feelings involved,” she said. “And that makes it a much bigger hurdle.”

She wants to see Pound get a chance to prove itself.

“I hope that we have the opportunity to fight and just be a cute little small town, a la Stars Hollow,” she said, invoking the fictional Connecticut town from “Gilmore Girls.”

“It doesn’t have to be anything grand. We’re not trying to be Chesapeake, we’re not trying to be Roanoke. We’re not trying to do anything like that. Just let us be. But hopefully we can figure out how to do that appropriately.”

She learned late Thursday that she didn’t get the nod from the judges, but she said that’s not going to keep her from being involved.

“I’m not just going to stop participating and doing everything I can to help in this process,” she said. “I’ve made some friends and some allies, and I definitely want to continue fighting and doing everything I can to help the town.”

In 1979, the actor Tommy Lee Jones, who was filming “Coal Miner’s Daughter” nearby, was arrested late one night in Pound after a car crash. He was charged with drunkenness, assaulting a police officer and resisting arrest.

With only two employees on the town's payroll, Pound's town hall is generally pretty quiet — unless it's hosting town council meetings, which have been raucous on occasion. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

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On a day in May 2021, the full power of the Virginia attorney general's office was brought down on Pound.

The memory still rankles some residents who see the incident as just another instance of outsiders trying to control the town. Others, though, believe it shows just how much the town has been hurt by its declining tax base and the inexperience of some of its leaders.

For years, the town council had known that its wastewater system had problems; it was aging and was not permitted for the kind of volume it was handling. Untreated sewage was being released into the Pound River, and in 2016, the town signed a consent order with the Department of Environmental Quality and agreed to pay a civil fine of \$7,770 and complete \$3 million worth of repairs.

But in May 2021, Jerald Hess, an assistant attorney general, drove six hours from Richmond to deliver a grim message during a hastily called town council meeting.

Five years after the consent order was signed, nothing had changed, he said.

In fact, just weeks earlier, the Virginia Department of Health had warned residents of an “ongoing sewage release” into the Pound River from the town's treatment plant. The board of supervisors in neighboring Dickenson County was threatening legal action against the town over the leaks.

Time was up, Hess said, and he'd come on orders of the attorney general himself to give the council a choice: The town could either agree to hand over its water and sewer operations to the Wise County Public Service Authority, or it could face up to \$30 million in civil penalties. Criminal charges were a possibility.

"To be perfectly frank, the residents of Pound deserve better," Hess said during the meeting, which was posted on Facebook. "The citizens of Virginia expect better. Your downstream neighbors expect and deserve better."

That afternoon, the council voted unanimously to consolidate its water and sewer operations with the PSA.

"I hated to do it," Green said last month. "But it felt like we had no choice. It felt like we, the town, had missed the opportunity to avoid doing it a long time ago.

"To me, clean drinking water and the river as assets to this town and to the future of this town and our area is just so important – too important to play games with, or to try and play brinkmanship with the state."

Some residents saw – still see – something more nefarious. They believe that the water system takeover was orchestrated by the county. That the PSA wanted the town's system, and the million-plus dollars in coronavirus relief money that the town was set to receive. That the PSA used the consolidation as an excuse to raise rates. That the town manager gave away the utility when it could have been saved.

It's true that rates went up for some customers; Tabby Back, who owns a clock repair and jewelry shop in downtown Pound, said he's paying three times what he used to when the town ran the system.

But it's also true that the town hadn't regularly raised water or sewer rates over the years to pay for maintenance.

The most recent town budget did include some rate increases, said former council member Clifton Cauthorne, who resigned in December. At one point in the recent past, the council raised rates for customers outside the town limits, he said.

But for the most part, the town had protected its residents from rate hikes over the years, he acknowledged.

“Politically, maybe, we just weren’t willing to skyrocket our rates,” he said. “We were raising our rates, but primarily on the backs of out of town customers because you always look out for the shareholders, and the shareholders are the citizens of the town.”

Fred Luntsford, who represents Pound’s district on the county board of supervisors and sits on the board of the PSA, said he’d been floating the idea of turning over the town’s water and sewer for five or six years. It just made sense, he said, considering that the town’s revenues had been dropping and the costs kept rising.

“It has been said, you need to pay attention to this now, because the shoe’s going to drop sometime,” he said. “Well, it dropped. And who was there to save the residents who need good water and sewer service? The PSA.”

Mullins, who was confronted with the water crisis as soon as he was hired in spring 2021, said the town didn’t have much of a choice in what to do with the system, or the federal money attached to it.

The town received \$800,000 in American Rescue Plan Act money, Mullins said, with more pledged. But even before Hess’ visit, the state had insisted that “every dime” be put toward wastewater system repairs and the town council had agreed, he said. So when Pound handed the system over to the PSA, the money had to go with it – as will the ARPA installment that’s supposed to come this spring, he said.

Short, who has continued to be involved in town affairs after leaving the council, said he’d seen over the years that there were problems with the water and sewer systems, and he had disagreed with the engineering firms hired by the town over how best to address them. He was reluctant to raise rates as long as he didn’t feel confident that the money would be spent correctly, he said.

He can’t argue with the loss of the utilities, he said. “I agree 100% that the operations and the way it was managed was completely wrong,” he said.

His issue, he said, is that the taxpayers who funded the system have lost their investment. And he still has questions about how some of the assets were transferred to the PSA – questions that can’t be answered until there’s a full audit, he said.

“I absolutely believe that in the end, the town of Pound’s water system is going to be a huge asset to the county PSA,” Green said. He thinks the PSA will be able to extend new lines to new customers and have new revenue streams – maybe even have access to new sources of funding.

He doesn't see a conspiracy. Instead, he sees the mark of inexperience among town officials, including himself.

"I didn't understand how bad the situation was, and how much leeway the state had already given the town," he said. "And I don't think to be honest anybody on council ... really understood the situation because they weren't trained in it. They weren't professionals.

"I think there was just a level of ignorance about it. And denial. There was the sense that, well, it'll work out. We'll find a way."

With maybe a few exceptions, like Short, "Nobody knew how bad the town was," Cauthorne said.

The town of Pound, which has a long history in Wise County, is called “The Pound” by longtime residents. The name came either from a family or from an old pounding mill. Photo by Megan Schnabel

In 2011, the town of Pound received \$158,056 in revenue from the coal severance tax, according to county records.

In 2021, it got \$11,910.

Coal companies pay the severance tax based on how much coal they extract; state code sets the rate at up to 1% of the gross receipts from the sale or use of the coal by the producer – so as coal production has declined across Virginia’s coalfields, so have those revenues.

“We were balancing our budget on coal severance tax revenue,” Cauthorne said. “That’s where the mistake came in financially. Because when that went away, we could not afford to live the way we had been living. And that’s when we started running up line-of-credit debt, and that’s when things started falling apart.”

Several other former council members and Dean, the former mayor, did not respond to phone or Facebook messages requesting comment for this story.

But Short concurred with Cauthorne’s assessment. Instead of socking away the severance tax money into a rainy-day fund or using it for capital improvements, the town put it toward operating expenses.

“You can’t do that,” he said. “And now that it’s dried up, well, they don’t have that extra \$125,000 but their budget kept increasing.”

With its shrinking tax base, the town didn’t have the cash on hand to pay for millions of dollars in sewer system repairs, or even for the initial engineering studies, so the council took out a nearly \$400,000 line of credit on which it paid \$1,000 a month in interest, Short said.

The town expected it would land a grant to reimburse the expense. But last May, not long before Hess’ visit to Pound, embezzlement indictments came down against a town employee who later pleaded guilty. That investigation, combined with the fact that the town was several years behind on its audits, scuttled hopes of outside financial help.

And then payments on the debt were missed, and the bank account was frozen.

Getting a grip on the town's financial situation – which, given the lack of audits, is murky at best – will be one of the first tasks for the new council.

The town's only two paid employees are Cindy Mullins and Chris Wilcox, the interim police chief; there is no clerk, no treasurer, no public works department, no attorney, no town manager. Kennedy and Carson said they're keeping the critical bills paid. Carson has been relying on free labor from people doing community service to help with maintenance issues.

No one could be hired as long as the council lacked a quorum. Even now, there's the question of how much staff the town can afford. In 2021, the town's budget was \$400,000, with a quarter of that going to insurance and another \$5,000 to \$7,000 a month to the power bill, Mullins said.

Some years ago, Cauthorne said, when the council was interviewing candidates for the town manager's job and had talked to a half-dozen people, another council member made a remark that has stuck with Cauthorne: Why are we interviewing these people when we can't afford them?

Relying on a mayor who's also part-time town manager, as Pound did for years, can save money in the short run. But Michelle Gowdy, executive director of the Virginia Municipal League, said it's not a sustainable model longer-term because having the same person in both roles can cause a conflict.

Most towns that she has worked with have a fairly stable town council and town manager, she said. Unfortunately, she said, Pound hasn't had either in quite a while.

"The longevity of their problems I think is probably more prevalent than most of the other small towns," she said.

Green believes that the embezzlement – which also divided the town council, with some members wanting to keep it quiet and others seeking transparency – was another symptom of an underfunded municipality

"It's something that happens in small towns," he said. "It's a thing that happens in places where there's not good oversight. That comes with decreasing town budgets. It's hard to maintain good staff and hard to maintain good oversight."

With so few services now being provided by the town, the question of just what residents are getting in return for the town taxes they pay has been raised by several local and state officials.

“Everything that the Wise County Board of Supervisors is doing, and everything in my discussions with Del. Kilgore, tell me everybody is looking out for the citizens of the town of Pound,” said Michael Hatfield, Wise County’s administrator. “They’re paying taxes and they’re not getting any benefit from it.”

Carson said she understands the frustration of being taxed by both the county and the town; she pays both sets of taxes, too.

“I feel so strongly that taxpayers are saying, ‘What is our money going for?’” she said. “But at the same time if they see actual change, I don’t think that they would mind. I think they’d say, ‘Wow, we’re investing in our town. We are investing to bring it back to life.’

“My thing is for the taxpayers to look at it as they’re investing in this town, and they are the ones who can save it and make a difference. Each and every one of them.”

Clisso, now employs 10 people and does business with 450 restaurants and grocery stores. Photo by

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Eugene Mullins is just 40, but he remembers when Pound was bustling.

“When I grew up, you couldn’t find a parking spot up the street anywhere,” he said. “It was just business after business after business.”

His father would tell him stories from his own youth, when things were even busier. At one point, Mullins said, there were seven bars in town, catering to folks from dry counties just across the Kentucky line.

Now, he lamented, there’s nowhere to sit down for a beer and a burger.

Pound has lost more than 26% of its population since the 1950 census. Businesses have followed, and so has the town’s tax base. The opening of the U.S. 23 bypass around Pound in the 1960s meant even fewer travelers would make their way into town.

Mullins would like to see Pound create some kind of incentive program to lure businesses back: restaurants, beer joints, maybe a music venue in the old movie theater building.

He and his wife, Brittany Avery Mullins, are getting ready to start renovating an old town-owned building to house a kids’ clothing boutique that will also sell some of the wooden bowls and furniture that they make.

“I’d like to see all these buildings full of businesses,” he said on a drive through town. “I’d like to see things in this town for our kids to do.”

Keeping young people in Pound is critical to the town’s future, Carson said.

“The youth are growing up right now saying, ‘What are we here for?’” she said. “There’s no coal right now. There’s nothing keeping them here. We have to come together as a community and say, ‘What do we want our town to be known for now?’ We’ve got to focus on something where we can create jobs.”

The town owns several buildings, Carson said, and she’d like to see them repurposed for new ventures. She said that the town’s economic development authority came up with a plan to offer low rent in

exchange for rehab work, and that she talked to the owners of a Mexican restaurant and to someone who wanted to open a music and photography venue. But nothing came of those efforts – a fact she blames on the inability of local officials to work together.

Cindy Mullins said the disarray in town hall has been a primary concern for the business owners she's been meeting. In November, Short delivered to the town council letters from a group of business owners who said they wouldn't pay taxes until an audit had been completed and they could see how their tax dollars were being spent.

Susan Downs-Freeman owns the Fabric House in downtown Pound and briefly filled a town council vacancy last year before a judge determined that her appointment hadn't been legal. She has been withholding her tax payments to the town. She's tired of being taxed by both Pound and Wise County, she said, and she's not sure what she's getting for her money.

The Golden Pine, a roadhouse that used to stand between town proper and the bypass, gained notoriety in the 1990s when its owner successfully challenged on constitutional grounds a local ordinance that banned dancing. The federal judge who ruled on the case did, indeed, reference "Footloose" in his opinion. (The town council rewrote the ordinance the next year to pass First Amendment muster. The bar closed in the early 2000s after losing its liquor license.)

An audit of town finances might change her mind, she said. "Get legal, and I'll be legal and I'll pay my taxes again," she said.

Greg Clisso, who ran a salad dressing company out of the old Saba Market grocery store building in downtown Pound for more than a dozen years, said he'd love to see more business come to the town but believes a significant change in attitude is needed first.

He launched Chef G.W. Clisso 30 miles up the road in the town of Appalachia in 1995 after the coal downturn shuttered his Norton restaurant, he said. He later moved the business to Pound, and it continued to grow as he inked deals with Food City, Ingles Markets and other retailers.

But about three years ago, he moved back to Appalachia.

He was seeing sales growth of 2% to 3% a month. He needed more room, and he wanted to take over the old Pound High School building to expand his operations and add cooking classes, maybe even a music venue.

But he got pushback from the town – he blames a “lack of vision” – so he left.

Today, he said, his products are in 450 stores and restaurants in 10 states, and he has 10 employees. He still holds a long-term lease on the building in Pound.

“Pound really broke my heart,” he said. “I keep telling them, when they finally get it together, I’ll come back and do something there.”

Some see tourism as a piece of Pound’s economic recovery.

With the town’s proximity to the George Washington and Jefferson National Forest, and to waterways, Pound should be making the most of its outdoor recreation opportunities, Green thinks.

The 44-mile Pine Mountain Trail, which passes about 3 miles from Pound, is a piece of the Great Eastern Trail project, an effort to create a hiking trail from Alabama to New York. Green sees potential for Pound to capitalize on the foot traffic, much as the Washington County town of Damascus has taken advantage of tourism from the nearby Appalachian Trail.

Some see an opportunity in the region’s waterways. In 2020, a 17-mile stretch of the Pound River starting at the town was named a Virginia Scenic River by the state, which noted its scenic beauty and varied flora and fauna, with a sizeable beaver population, as well as red fox, wild turkey, white-tailed deer, warblers, woodpeckers and green heron. The river also offers several rapids; Carson said the town plans to put in a kayak launch and encourage tubing as well.

Others see the possibility for cultural tourism, to capitalize on the crafters and musicians in the region.

“You’ve got some of the best craftsmen that ever was around here,” said David Williams, who moved to Pound 30 years ago. He owns the TV repair shop in downtown Pound but spends a lot of his time working with Back on old clocks and building furniture out of salvaged barn wood. “They’re starting to die off because it’s a lost art.”

Back concurred. “If the right people get a hold of Pound, it can be a great craft community,” he said. “But Pound just needs a little help somewhere along the line to get it going.”

Some help has come from Green’s employer, Appalshop, which was created in the late 1960s to preserve and promote Appalachian culture.

The nonprofit secured a federal grant to support projects including four public art installations and the Red Fox Storytelling Festival, which went on hiatus last year but will resume next month in downtown Pound, said Green, who recently moved from Pound to Northern Virginia to be closer to family.

The projects add up to \$200,000, with \$100,000 coming from the National Endowment for the Arts and the rest as cash and in-kind matches from Appalshop, the town and the Historical Society of the Pound, he said.

Leabern Kennedy was elected in November to fill a vacancy on the town council, but over the past couple of months much of her time has been spent lobbying legislators about the bill that would revoke Pound's charter. "That's where I grew up," she said. "I've seen it be a thriving community where it was the place to be, and I think with the right leadership we can be that again." Photo by Megan Schnabel.

Leabern Kennedy thought twice – maybe more than twice – about seeking the open seat on Pound’s town council in November.

She’d been a vocal critic of how the town was being run, but she had plenty of responsibilities already, including a full-time job at Verizon and elderly relatives to care for.

But she ran anyway – “I just felt like somebody’s got to do something,” she said – and she pulled 220 votes, and she became the town’s unofficial lobbyist in Richmond once the whole charter debate started.

She and Short, who served on council from 2014 to 2018, have been calling and emailing legislators. They testified remotely and in person during committee and subcommittee meetings.

She’s been frustrated by what she sees as a lack of assistance from Pound’s legislative delegation, to whom she’s reached out for help without success, she said.

But she said several General Assembly members from other parts of the state talked to her after they heard her speak in Richmond, and the Virginia Municipal League has been in close contact as well.

“We have offers of help from a little bit of everywhere,” Kennedy said. “And that’s a plus. Those things, they don’t happen. People usually take care of their own little square of the world and everybody else is kind of on their own.

“I think there are some people out there who recognize we can have a thriving community with the right leadership. I’m appreciative to those folks for being there and offering their help.”

There’s less appreciation for the county board of supervisors, which voted to ask for the revocation of Pound’s charter, or for Kilgore, who introduced the bill.

There’s also a question about where the idea for the bill actually came from.

Not from Wise County, Luntsford and Hatfield said.

“The county wasn’t the start of this,” Luntsford said. “We didn’t start the request. It came down from the state legislature.”

Members of the General Assembly – neither Hatfield nor Luntsford would say who – approached Hatfield, who then brought the idea to the board.

Kilgore – who currently does not represent Pound in the General Assembly but will after redistricting is complete – said it wasn't him. The region's other legislators – Sens. Todd Pillion, R-Abingdon, and Travis Hackworth, R-Tazewell, and Del. Will Wampler, R-Washington – didn't reply to requests for interviews this week.

Kilgore did say, however, that he needs to see meaningful changes in Pound. He's heard assurances from the town before, he said, but has yet to see substantive action taken. That's why he went ahead with the bill, despite pleas to wait until new council members could be appointed.

"There's just been so much infighting and frustration, I thought ... let's put something down so that we can at least move something forward," he said.

He said he's not embarrassed by Pound, but he has little patience for drama. "You don't want to see this in the paper every day, every week, something going on," he said.

Nor will he abide the continuation of long-standing feuds. "We've got to get over that," he said. "We don't need to go back in time. We just need to start a clean slate, move forward, and that's what I hope the town of Pound will do."

He said he will meet with the town to help however he can. "I'm just not being a cruel, mean person trying to take Pound's charter away," he said. "I want to work with them, I want to get it going."

Luntsford, who is also town manager of Appalachia, said the board of supervisors did support the idea of charter revocation, although reluctantly – at least on his part.

"We are sympathetic to our small towns here in Wise County, and we want to see everybody survive and prosper," he said. He said he had talked to Pound's leaders over the years to offer help, but the situation in the town continued to deteriorate.

"Since they have that ultimatum, nobody here in Wise County is going to turn their backs on those people, especially me," he said. "I'm going to do all I can to help them. ..."

"But those whom we are trying to help have to have skin in the game by being able to communicate, govern and compromise."

A mural at the entrance to Pound on the Kentucky side features several of its favorite sons. From left: Glenn Roberts, a basketball player who, while at Emory & Henry College, popularized the use of the jump-shot and went on to a pro career.; Francis Gary Powers, the pilot whose U-2 spy plane was shot down over Soviet airspace in 1960; Napoleon Hill, a self-help author known for “Think and Grow Rich”; Chant Kelly, who was a developer of Pound in the 1920s. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

The bill gives the town until sometime in 2023 – July 1, according to the House version of the bill, Nov. 1 in the Senate version – to show improvement; the date will have to be worked out between the two General Assembly chambers before they adjourn March 12, but Kilgore said during the Feb. 21 Senate subcommittee meeting that he was fine with the extended deadline.

Kilgore has said he’ll come back to the General Assembly to repeal the bill once he sees progress. But just how that progress will be measured has been a matter of some discussion.

As introduced, the bill didn’t include any benchmarks, a fact that elicited consternation from townspeople and questions from some outside observers, including the chair of the Virginia Municipal League’s town section.

“Pound needs to know how they can keep their charter, what’s the grade that they need to achieve, and then how can they keep this from happening to them next year,” Steven Trivett, who’s also mayor of the town of Ashland in Hanover County, told legislators at a Feb. 21 Senate subcommittee meeting.

Sean Brock, the noted Southern chef, also grew up in Pound, but he isn’t (yet) featured on any promotional materials.

The final version of the bill still doesn’t include measurable goals. But Kilgore said that his office, in concert with VML, has developed a list of five benchmarks that has been shared with the town:

- Hire a town attorney with local government experience.
- Hold, attend and participate in council meetings, and act with professionalism and respect.
- Approve and manage a state budget, including a capital improvement plan.
- Attend training on matters such as the state Freedom of Information Act and budgeting.
- Follow all state, federal and local laws, including moving town elections to November.

Gowdy said VML is ready to work with Pound as long as the new town council agrees to work within agreed-upon rules. She has been lining up volunteer lawyers and others to help, she said.

Sen. Ghazala Hashmi, D-Chesterfield County – who, with Sen. Creigh Deeds, D-Bath, cast the sole votes against Kilgore’s bill in either chamber – said she heard from 20 or so Pound residents and supporters, asking her to vote it down.

“The citizens feel like their voice has not been accounted for in the process,” said Hashmi, who serves on the Senate Local Government Committee and its Charters subcommittee and who voted against the bill at every stage.

They were concerned that a town’s charter revocation was being debated at the General Assembly – and so was she. “I would like to see us adhere to the processes that are outlined in code, that this really is a local-level decision rather than a state-level action,” Hashmi said.

“I was just disheartened that they didn’t get more folks supporting them,” she said. “I think they made a good effort of outreach and tried to express their concerns.”

Both Hashmi and Trivett also said that this legislative effort raises a broader question about what it could mean for localities throughout Virginia.

“I know that this is specific to Pound, and the messes Pound is having,” Trivett said during the subcommittee meeting. “But at the same time this has repercussions that could affect town and county relationships across the state.”

Cauthorne voiced a similar concern.

“There are a lot of towns that are struggling,” said Cauthorne, who resigned from the town council in December in order to force the appointment of new council members by the court. Pound has its problems, he said – but it also has a police department and a fire department and zoning authority.

“The question is, where do towns in Virginia need to be in order to remain towns?” he asked. “And I think ultimately the people in the town ought to vote on it and not the representatives in Richmond.”

Short questions whether what’s happening is even allowed under state code and says he wouldn’t be surprised if legal action follows.

The bill might have already had the kind of effect that Kilgore and others said they were hoping for: Cauthorne thinks the outside attention has served to bring together the people of Pound in a whole new way. “I believe a majority of people don’t want Richmond telling the town of Pound what to do,” he said. “I think that’s one thing we all agree on. I think that has united us.”

He said he’s going to advocate for a town vote on the charter question.

“If the people are willing to keep paying taxes for what they’re getting right now, then they ought to be allowed to,” he said.

“But if the people don’t want to continue paying taxes for the services they’re getting right now, then we ought to close her down. But it ought to be up to the people in Pound.”



ECONOMY

In Bath County, reopening the Warm Springs Pools is an emotional event

The Omni Homestead has spent \$4.6 million reconstructing the pool houses over the famous warm springs where presidents and others have “taken the waters.”



by **Megan Schnabel**
December 21, 2022



The Warm Springs Pools opened last Friday to local residents, a day before welcoming the general public. The water in the octagonal Gentlemen's Bath House, seen here, is usually 5 to 6 feet deep and is a constant 98 degrees. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

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The Warm Springs Pools have a storied history, studded with famous names.

Thomas Jefferson spent three weeks here, taking the waters to ease his rheumatism. James Madison soaked in the 98-degree pools. So did Martin Van Buren, John Tyler, Millard Fillmore, and Franklin D. and Eleanor Roosevelt. Wealthy travelers from across the East Coast arrived in Bath County by horse carriage and by train, drawn both by the purported healing properties of the water and by the timeless need to see and be seen.

But when the pools reopened last week – after decades of deterioration and a desperately needed renovation undertaken by the current owner, the Omni Homestead – bold-faced historic names seemed to matter less than personal connections to the property.

Like that of Maggie Woodzell, whose family has worked at the Homestead going back six and seven generations, and who delightedly described the Harry Potter-esque scene of snowflakes disappearing in midair as they encounter the steam of the pools.

Or Holly Hicks, a third-generation employee who jumped at the chance to again manage the pools, five years after she watched them close down.

Or Julie Langan, who doesn't work at the Omni Homestead but has been as invested as anyone in restoring the 19th-century bath houses that sit atop the pools, and who worried that she would burst into tears during Thursday's ribbon-cutting.

"It was a very emotional day," said Langan, who today is director of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources but who first visited the Homestead when she was in her teens and has continued the tradition with her own family.

"All kinds of emotions – joy and gratitude and relief," she said Friday morning, sitting in the resort's Christmas-bedecked Great Hall. "People ask me how long has it taken. I've been involved for I think 14 years. ... It's taken a long time."

The renovations, once they finally started last year, were substantial. Time had not been kind to the wood-frame buildings, the oldest of which dates to the early 19th century. Roofs were rotting, foundations collapsing. The buildings were in such bad shape that in 2017, Bath County ordered them closed to the public, saying they were no longer safe.

For years, residents had feared that the historic bath houses would simply be allowed to fall down around the pools.



Julie Langan, director of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, has been working to save the bath houses for more than a decade. She first visited the Homestead as a teenager and now brings her own daughter. Thursday's grand reopening was an emotional experience, she said. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

Those residents got a special preview of the \$4.6 million restoration on Friday, when the baths hosted a locals-only day before the resort started taking reservations from the general public.

“The community has wanted this done for a long time,” said Richard Chovin, a longtime member of the resort’s golf and tennis club who had snagged an 11 a.m. reservation for the pools. “There’s been a lot of pressure for a lot of years. ... I hope the community supports it now, and does some good things with it.”

* * *

The Warm Springs Pools are in the town of Warm Springs, about 5 miles from the Omni Homestead resort in Hot Springs. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

‘Getting in was delightful. Getting out was painful.’

At one time, there were 22 commercial springs operating within Bath County, according to a brief [history](#) compiled by the Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission. To this day, the county's place names reflect that history: Hot Springs, Warm Springs, Millboro Springs, Bath Alum Springs, Healing Springs.

The region became known for its healing waters, and then for the inns and hotels that catered to well-heeled visitors. The Warm Springs Hotel, which stood near the pools until it was demolished in the 1920s, was the "centerpiece" of the Alleghany circuit for vacationers who would take the waters, said Phil Deemer, the president of Preservation Bath, a local group that for years pushed to save the crumbling bathhouses.

The adjacent pools started their life modestly enough, probably in the 1760s, as an open-air octagonal stone bathing basin, according to a historic structure report that was completed prior to the recent restoration.

The first bath house was built in the 1820s; it was expanded over the years and today is known as the Gentlemen's Bath House. The current Ladies' Bath House was built in the 1870s, while the Reception House dates to the 1890s.

An undated photo inside one of the bath houses. Photo courtesy of the Omni Homestead Resort.

In 1925, the pools became part of the Homestead. The resort itself saw a quick succession of ownership changes starting in the early 1990s: from the Ingalls family, which had owned it for more than a hundred years, to Club Corporation International, to KSL Capital Partners, a private equity firm.

During those transitions, the bath houses continued to deteriorate. About a decade ago, Preservation Bath started talking to KSL about acquiring the structures in hopes of saving them, Deemer said. The negotiations dragged on for years, but the two sides finally got close to an agreement in 2013, he said – and then weeks later, Omni bought the Homestead as part of a larger deal with KSL.

Preservation Bath's hopes of taking over the bath houses evaporated. But, Deemer said, the group was hopeful about Omni's intentions.

“They told us they were committed to fixing it up properly,” he said. “Once they became owners, we were much more confident that they would in fact do the job right.”

That didn't mean it happened quickly, a fact that sowed new worry, and frustration, among some residents – especially after Bath County shut down the bath houses.

Mark Spadoni, the managing director of the Omni Homestead, said this week that the company understood the apprehension; the community had dealt with numerous owners in quick succession and didn't know what Omni would do. “Until you start seeing things done, blind trust isn't usually the best thing,” he said.

But in the deal with KSL, Omni had acquired a whole portfolio of new properties, including the Grove Park Inn in Asheville, North Carolina, and it took several years for the company to fully integrate its new holdings, he said.

In 2015, Omni set up an advisory committee of historic preservation experts and others, including Langan, to figure out the best path forward for the bath houses. Over the next year, the group researched the structures' history and documented their current condition.

In 2018, Bath County approved an additional 5% transient occupancy tax that would be levied on guests at the Homestead and that could help pay for capital improvements at the resort, including the pools.

In February 2020, Omni unveiled plans for the restoration, with a projected opening date of mid-2021.

Weeks later, the pandemic struck.

Crews led by general contractor Lionberger Construction in Roanoke finally started work in 2021. But the project continued to be beset by surprises. This spring, workers discovered that “everything was in considerably worse condition than we estimated,” architect Ed Pillsbury of 3North in Richmond said at the time. Problems extended from the foundations to the roofs; the existing framing of the roof of the Ladies' Bath House “crumbled to dust” as shoring was put in place, he said.

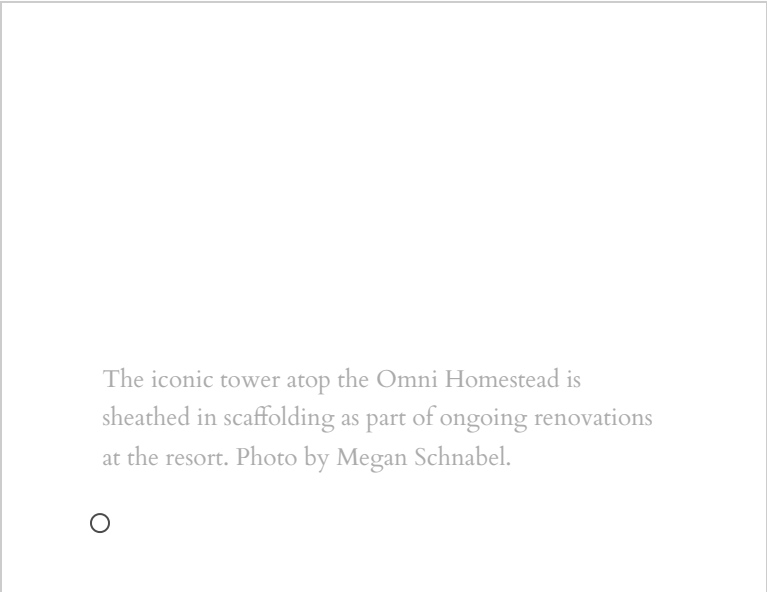
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The cost of the project eventually more than doubled from an early estimate of \$2 million, but they held onto their late 2022 opening date. “It’s almost amazing and remarkable to think that Lionberger – which did just a great job – accomplished what they did in about a 14-month period of time,” Spadoni said.

While there’s still landscaping to be done, the pools are now welcoming visitors – up to 35 at a time in the Ladies’ Bath House, and 25 at a time in the Gentlemen’s.

The buildings reflect what visitors would have seen a hundred years ago. Because the bath houses were modified and expanded multiple times over the years, the team opted to base its restoration on the 1920s structures.

The buildings have retained their simple wood-frame design. In each bath house, an entryway



The iconic tower atop the Omni Homestead is sheathed in scaffolding as part of ongoing renovations at the resort. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

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provides an area for a pool attendant to hand out plush gray towels and black pool noodles. Small curtained changing rooms – sparsely furnished with a small wooden bench, a clothes hook and a wall mirror – encircle the pools.

With its shades of white and gray, the overall feeling is rustic spa – an upgrade from what it had become, Langan said.

“Quite honestly, they had gotten to be so dilapidated,” she said. “And not just the physical structures being deteriorated, but everything being kind of dirty and nasty. They had just cheap shower curtains hanging. I could understand why maybe some people weren’t enthusiastic about going and taking the waters. Now, I think it’s a more positive experience just through positive changes like picking a palette – the noodles, the towels, the curtains. And yet it’s still the same place.”

Right down to the brutal change in temperature that bathers encounter when they climb back out of the water, she said. She’d gotten the full effect the day before, during a quiet soak with her family in the men’s pool.

“It’s still just as cold when you’re trying to get dressed in December when you’re dripping wet,” she said. “That has not changed. The getting in was delightful. The getting out was painful.”

Langan knows that the community had concerns about how the work would be done. For a while, she acknowledged, so did she.

Renovations continue at Omni Homestead

A \$145 million renovation and expansion that will update the Omni Homestead Resort inside and out is on track to be completed next year, the resort’s managing director said this week.

The project, which was [announced last fall](#), will freshen the resort’s 480 guest rooms and public spaces, fix brickwork and windows, and overhaul plumbing, electrical and mechanical systems. It also includes construction of a new wedding pavilion and new employee housing.

The first renovated guest rooms will be available in February, Mark Spadoni said Tuesday. All rooms and most public spaces will be completed in time for the summer season, while the remainder of the project, including the pavilion and employee accommodations, are scheduled to be finished by next fall, he said.

Omni bought the resort in 2013 from KSL Capital Partners LLC, a private equity firm, becoming the fourth owner of the Homestead since the early 1990s.

Julie Langan, director of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, said none of the previous owners had undertaken the kind of large-scale work that had been needed for quite some time.

But she said Omni listened to local opinions. “And when it came time to make a decision, they agreed it should be kept as it is, and people should have that authentic experience,” she said. “So it looks a lot better, but it’s otherwise not different. It’s not changed.”

Omni had another reason to maintain the bath houses’ historic character: The company intended to apply for state and federal historic tax credits to help fund the work, and those programs require strict adherence to rules about materials and design.

About \$4.5 million of the \$4.6 million spent on the project will be eligible for tax credits, said Omni Homestead spokeswoman Lynn Swann. Of that amount, state tax credits will cover 25% and federal tax credits 20%.

Omni still must submit for approval a final report detailing the work that it completed. But Langan, whose office manages the state tax credit program, has been working closely with the resort and said she sees no reason to worry.

“There’s been very consistent coordination and communication throughout, so there’s no risk that we’re going to say, ‘Wait a minute, you didn’t do what you said you were going to do,’” she said.

She said her office should approve the final report within about 30 days after Omni submits it and then will send it on to the U.S. Park Service for approval of the federal tax credits.

“They’re doing now what no one has probably done since this place was built,” said Langan, who has been working with Omni on its plans for the project. “And they’re really doing what it needs as opposed to putting a Band-Aid on it. ... You can only do that for so long. It had reached the point where that wasn’t going to work anymore.”

The work initially was expected to cost \$120 million, but that figure has increased due both to supply issues and to some changes in the project’s scope, Spadoni said.

“When you open up a building, some areas that frankly haven’t been opened up for 100 years, you find things that you didn’t expect,” he said.

Omni is pursuing historic tax credits to fund a portion of the work.

The Homestead has been operating at reduced capacity for several years, first because of the pandemic and then because of the renovations. For most of last year, about half of the resort’s rooms were available, Spadoni said; currently, only about 170 are open to guests.

The Homestead is Bath County’s largest employer and counted more than 600 employees through the summer, he said. That number will drop as the resort enters its slow season after the holidays, but he expects to ramp back up in the

To date, Swann said, Omni has been reimbursed \$3.7 million through the increased occupancy tax for work on the pools and for a \$145 million renovation and expansion at the resort itself. *(See sidebar about this project, above.)* Omni has spent \$74.5 million on the two projects so far, she said.

spring and have more than 800 people on staff for the summer season.

“Without the creativity and cooperation from the county in structuring this 5% [occupancy] tax rebate to apply towards the resort renovation along with the state and federal historic tax credits, the renovations and improvements of the Homestead would never have happened,” she said.

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Debra Madiedo and Richard Chovin were among the first guests to try out the newly reopened pools on Friday. Madiedo frequented the pools before they closed in 2017. “Toward the end, they needed a lot of repair – you could tell that,” she said. “I was so happy for this.” Photo by Megan Schnabel.

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'It's a big deal'

Kate Loeffler, who owns the nearby Inn at Gristmill Square with her husband, said she was tempted to jump into the newly reopened pools, winter clothes and all, when she attended the grand reopening last week.

"It's a big deal, not just for Bath County and the Homestead – and we're super grateful for all that they're doing – but it's really a gem in Virginia and the East Coast," she said. "It's like one of those wonders of the world.

"It's emotional, it really is," she said.

It's also big business.

Tourism is Bath County's primary industry; according to figures on the county's website, it generates more than \$225 million in revenues annually and employs almost 65% of the county's workforce.

Much of that impact comes from the Homestead, which is the county's largest employer. But numerous small inns and restaurants in Warm Springs and Hot Springs and beyond also cater to tourists, and their owners are waiting to see what the reopening of the baths will mean for business.

The Loefflers, who have operated the 18-room inn for almost a dozen years, would often get calls from would-be visitors about the status of the pools, which are just up the road.

Loeffler said it's difficult to determine just how badly regional tourism was hurt by the darkened bath houses over the past five years; the pools aren't the only reason people visit Bath County, she pointed out. "But obviously tourism declined a little bit," she said.

About the Warm Springs Pools

The Warm Springs Pools are currently open Wednesdays through Sundays, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Reservations are recommended and are available on the hour. A 50-minute soak costs \$25 per person.

Family soaking time is from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Swimsuits are required, and children under 18 may come with a parent.

Adult co-ed soaking time for ages 16-plus (swimsuits required) is from 1 to 3 p.m.

Adult soaking (by gender, ages 18-plus; swimsuits optional) is from 3 to 6 p.m.

The inn is offering special rates through the end of February to encourage guests to combine a stay at the inn with a visit to the pools, she said.

Reservations may be made by calling 540-839-3860 or emailing warm Springs Pools@omnihotels.com.

“We’re just looking forward to the positive momentum behind the pools,” she said. “Guests for so long have been wondering when they’re going to reopen. It’s been a hot topic.”

Five miles away, in Hot Springs, Dave Hahn is eager to see just what the pools will mean for his business.

He and his wife submitted an offer on the Vine Cottage Inn in 2017. As part of their research, he said, they learned that 20,000 people had visited the pools the previous year. Figuring that half were local, and half of the remaining 10,000 probably stayed at the Homestead, that still left 5,000 guests for smaller inns – a “nice chunk of change,” he said.

But by the time they closed on the deal, the pools had been shut down.

Even so, the Vine Cottage Inn had a good year in 2021, and 2022 has been even better. Hahn thinks 2023 could be the best on record.

He thinks Omni has spent the time and money to do the work correctly.

“For them to undertake the pools and the renovation at the Homestead, I applaud them,” he said. “Yes, it took a while. Yes, there was some community anxiety toward Omni for a while. But then COVID hit, and what are they going to do?”

* * *

(From left) Maggie Woodzell, Olivia Byer and Holly Hicks greeted guests on Friday, when the pools were open only to local residents. Hicks, who managed the pools before they were shut down five years ago, said she jumped at the chance to work there again. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

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‘Worth honoring’

Hicks will celebrate her 14th anniversary with the Homestead in February. She was managing the spa and the pools in 2017 when the bath houses were shut down, and then took a front office job for a few years.

And then Spadoni asked her if she wanted to be part of the reopening.

“I was like, absolutely,” she said. “You don’t even have to ask me twice. When do I interview? Just go ahead and send me the offer letter.”

History was never her thing in school, she said. “But once you’ve worked at the Homestead for as long as I have, you just start to love it,” she said. “I may not be a history buff for anything else, but I’m definitely a history buff when it comes to the Homestead and these pools.”

Woodzell nodded. One of her ancestors helped clear the land for the hotel, she said. And the man whose photo is featured on the cover of that 1949 book about the region, “The Valley Road: The Story of Virginia Hot Springs”? He’s a relative.

The bath houses are listed on both the National Register of Historic Places and the Virginia Landmarks Register. It’s clear, Deemer said, that the bath houses and the pools are historically significant to Virginia,

and particularly to Bath County.

But he, too, has a personal connection that goes beyond the larger history. He started coming to the pools 30 years ago, and he retains vivid memories of those visits. “It just was so peaceful and so wonderful,” he said.

He moved from Hot Springs to Charlottesville at the beginning of the pandemic and hasn’t visited the renovated baths yet, and he wonders how close the experience will be to what he remembers.

He recalls in particular visiting the pools at New Year’s in 1999 and 2000.

“It was freezing, and it would be snowing, and the snow would be coming down inside the pool,” he said. “It was just – different. And it was significant, and worth honoring.”

Correction, 9:12 a.m. Dec. 21: An earlier version of this story incorrectly reported that Omni acquired the Amelia Island Resort from KSL in 2013. In fact, Omni already owned that property. The story has been updated.