

A Mountain Legacy

West Virginia's Mont Chateau Hotel and State Park

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PHOTO CIRCA 1900

MONT CHATEAU LOOSELY TRANSLATES FROM FRENCH AS **MOUNTAIN CASTLE**

Eight miles east of Morgantown, WV, nestled in the scenic Cheat River Valley, overlooking Cheat Lake, stands the historic Mont Chateau Lodge. Today it is the Mont Chateau Research Center, home of the West Virginia Geological & Economic Survey, with its popular Museum of Geology and Natural History and Gift Shop.

A Rocky Start (1894–1898)

The original Mont Chateau Hotel, the “Old Mont,” was completed on a 42 acre tract once owned by lumber businessman Christian Ley. The land had been purchased in 1893 by Pittsburgh native Fred Dean, who envisioned building a grand hotel on a long popular camping and fishing area of the Cheat River. The Hotel opened on August 5, 1894 and was operated by the “Mont Chateau Hotel Company,” comprised of Dean’s wife Ellen, George Hardy and Captain John Dales acting as manager.

An early review held high promise for the new enterprise:

After descending to the Cheat River, crossing that stream by [Ice’s] ferry, and ascending the opposite mountains some distance, there is the Mont Chateau Hotel, a large building, but almost hidden among the massive rocks and dense forest trees. The location is wild in the extreme and will no doubt become a popular resort for those who admire nature strictly unadorned. Not opened until late in the season, it contains 33 bed chambers. In the large parlor are great fire-places in which huge black logs are burned ... which give an old-time home-like appearance to the mountain hotel. (Pittsburgh Press, 9/23/1894)

Unfortunately, after only two years, the hotel went into default and Mont Chateau was sold to the Cheatmont Resort Company in 1896. And after only two more years, the hotel was sold again in 1898 to Alexander Voigt of Pittsburgh, who hired his son-in-law, Frank St. Clair, as Manager. Marketing primarily to the Pittsburgh area, Voigt and St. Clair operated the Mont Chateau Hotel and its seven cottages successfully for the next 21 years.

An Upscale Resort (1898–1919)

The hotel became popular throughout the East, setting record attendance with each succeeding season. Visitors came to Morgantown via railway or Monongahela River steam-driven packet boat, and thence to Mont Chateau by horse-drawn coach.

From its opening in 1894 through 1919, Mont Chateau catered mostly to the “carriage trade,” particularly the Pittsburgh area’s upper class. It was reported that many famous persons visited, including Thomas A. Edison and a young General George C. Marshall.

From 1915 to 1919, Mont Chateau hosted West Virginia University football’s pre-season training camp. A baseball field less than a mile down-river from the Hotel served as the practice site. The *Pittsburgh Daily Post* considered the camp amenities to be among the best in the country: “Mont Chateau was ideal with its comfortable rooms, dining arrangements, grounds, swimming, and other

accommodations. In fact West Virginia has not been outdone by any other [team of] eleven training camp facilities.”

The Mont Chateau “Clubhouse” (1920–1924)

The clientele became more exclusive in 1920 when several distinguished leaders in the fields of industry, law, medicine and science, all members of Pittsburgh’s prestigious Duquesne Club, met to organize the “Mont Chateau Club” for the purpose of purchasing the property from the Voigt family. Prophetically, one member was Dr. I.C. White, first director of the West Virginia Geological & Economic Survey (1897–1927).

During 1920–1924, this group operated Mont Chateau as a private resort, retaining Frank St. Clair to continue managing what now was called the “Clubhouse.” Membership was pricy at \$500 (about \$7,000 in 2022 dollars).

The Club invested heavily to renovate the property, installing an electric generator for lighting the Clubhouse, cottages, and grounds, all new plumbing, and building one of Mont Chateau’s most distinctive features: a 100-yard-long cut-sandstone wall overlooking the Cheat River 150 feet below.

WVU’s football teams, including the school’s first undefeated 1922 squad, were invited to stay at the Clubhouse on nights before important home games, starting a long tradition of sequestering off-campus that continued, off and on, to this day.

Cheat River Hydroelectric Dam Forms “Lake Lynn” (1925)

Mont Chateau’s proximity to the river had always enabled the hotel to offer swimming, boating, and fishing. But the river was about to become a 1,730-acre lake, 13 miles long! In the early 1920s, property owners along the Cheat River were compelled to relinquish land that would be flooded by a new hydroelectric dam being built a few miles north, near the state line with Pennsylvania. The Mont Chateau Club had to cede 9.6 acres of riverfront in 1923.

At the dam, water-operated turbines began generating 52 megawatts of electricity, starting on December 23, 1925 and continuing through today. Although it took land from

riverside owners, the dam created a beautiful recreational lake. (Originally named Lake Lynn to honor a power company official, it officially became Cheat Lake in 1976.)

From Hotel to Private Home to Hotel Again (1925–1955)

The private resort venture proved a financial failure and, in 1925, the Club leased Mont Chateau to Frank St. Clair to manage it once again as a hotel. Amenities during this latter half of the Roaring Twenties included tennis, golf, and dancing to the music of Mont Chateau’s own orchestra.



One of Mont Chateau’s outstanding features: a 100-yard cut-sandstone wall overlooking the Cheat River.

PHOTO COURTESY JOHN BOCAN, WVGE&ES

The stock market crash that heralded the beginning of the Great Depression occurred just as Mont Chateau was closing its doors at the end of the 1929 season. Not immune to the economic hardships of the day, Mont Chateau was sold to a Pittsburgh bank for \$10,000 in a foreclosure sale in July of 1930. It would not re-open as a hotel for another 21 years.

In November of that year, Mont Chateau

Club member Samuel E. Diescher, purchased the Hotel, its cottages and 42 acres, for use as a personal residence. Extensive renovations were undertaken to transform the Hotel into a grand home. Three separate suites, as well as common entrance, living, dining and kitchen areas, were created out of the 43 rooms of the old Hotel. The Dieschers used Mont Chateau as a weekend retreat, living in a Pittsburgh hotel during the week to manage the family businesses.

Mont Chateau was home to some prosperous and noteworthy people during 1930–1950. Diescher was an internationally recognized consulting engineer who was credited with inventing seamless steel tubing. His father, Samuel A. Diescher, had been a renowned Pittsburgh civil and mechanical engineer who designed and built many of that city’s notable structures, including the Duquesne Incline. Mrs. Diescher was a prominent leader in civic affairs who appeared frequently in Pittsburgh society pages. Year-round residents of Mont Chateau during this period included Diescher’s brother and sister-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. Julius Benson. The Bensons hosted many prominent visitors in



what became known as the “Mont Chateau Mansion,” a Morgantown center for social affairs. Another perennial resident was Diescher’s mother-in law, Mrs. Caroline Benson, once an assistant to a lady-in-waiting for Queen Victoria, living in English palaces and often seeing the “Old Queen.” Her father had been a sculptor from whom the Queen commissioned several pieces.

Samuel Diescher died in 1950, and Mont Chateau was sold by his heirs to Morgantown attorney Arthur Walker and businessman Paul Layman. Under the new owners, the hotel, dining room, and cottages reopened to guests once again, after a long hiatus.

The End of the “Old Mont” (1955–1956)

In 1955, the State of West Virginia entered the picture for the first time when the WV Conservation Commission purchased Mont Chateau from Walker and Layman to create a year-round state-run resort. Plans were made to renovate the hotel and excavation had already begun by year’s end on construction of a new wing to add 18 rooms to the main building. This would become West Virginia’s 21st State Park, to open in the summer of 1956.

But in the early morning of May 6 that year, smoke was discovered coming from the old lodge. By the time firemen reached the remote location, the building was in total ruins, with only the chimneys left standing. It was reported that flames reached as high as 200 feet and were visible from Morgantown, eight miles distant. Today, only the stone carriage house, entrance gate, and overlook wall remain of the original Mont Chateau resort.



Architect’s rendering of proposed lodge at Mont Chateau State Park, 1956.

The spacious lobby in the lodge of Mont Chateau State Park, circa 1958.

Directional sign to former Mont Chateau State Park, 1966.

A New Lodge and State Park Rise from the Ashes (1956–1962)

In June 1956, only one month after the fire, the state’s Conservation Commission announced plans to erect a new building on the site of the old hotel. The new Mont Chateau would be one of only three “Super Lodges” in the Mountain State park system, together with Cacapon and Blackwater Falls, to have 50 or more guest rooms and dining room seating capacity of 250.



Today Mont Chateau Lodge is the home of the West Virginia Geological & Economic Survey and houses a Museum of Geology & Natural History featuring dinosaur skeletons, minerals, and fossils from around West Virginia and the world. Call 304-594-2331 or visit <http://www.wvgs.wvnet.edu> for more information.

Inset: The end of the WV Geological & Economic Survey building still features the Mont Chateau logo.

PHOTOS BY MIKE CALHOUN

Designed and constructed by the Walter Butler Company of Miami, Florida, the new Lodge's style was referred to as "mid-century rustic." Native stone, quarried in Aurora, WV, comprised the lower third of the building's front, as well as the columns supporting the portico and the buttress and connecting curved retaining wall. Dominating the building's front was a large flat white wall sporting the black metal "Mont Chateau" script. The remainder of the exterior was constructed of red-stained pine.

On June 7, 1958, West Virginia's newest state park was dedicated with a ribbon-cutting by Governor Cecil Underwood and the reigning Miss West Virginia, Miss Janice Sickles. Soon after opening, Mont Chateau added a stable and trails for horseback riding, a beach house with snack bar, sand beach, water slide, and diving platform.

In 1962, to provide meeting space, a new Activities and Convention Center was built directly behind the lodge. Designed by Henry Eldon & Associates and built by the Liston Construction Co., this facility hosted the Mont Chateau Summer Theater for several years, plus countless meetings, conventions, weddings, and other events.

During its first year, the lodge operated at capacity on many days, with numerous reservations for varied social and business activities. At year's end, the Conservation Commission reported over 16,000 people had visited Mont Chateau during its first six months of operation, providing the park system with its third-highest source of revenue.

State Park Unable to Turn a Profit (1962–1977)

By 1962, however, the new park's novelty had worn off, visitations waned, and room occupancy fell to only 29%. Due to continuing losses, park operation was leased to

a resort management company, Holiday Hosts, making Mont Chateau the only entity in the park system not operated directly by the state. But in 1967, after sustaining losses for five years, Holiday Hosts opted not to renew its lease.

What then? The WV Department of Natural Resources (DNR), successor to the Conservation Commission, contracted with West Virginia University to manage the Park starting July 1, 1967. This enabled WVU to use park facilities in the off-season for school-sponsored conferences and workshops. (WVU is believed to be the first American university to manage a state park.) After six years, however, WVU cited financial problems, and terminated its lease effective June 30, 1973.

In July of 1973 a 10-year lease was signed with a local company, Quarry Management, to operate the Park. The lessee later secured a liquor license for a supper club to be housed in the former recreation room of the Lodge. Because the sale of alcoholic beverages was prohibited in State Parks, Mont Chateau, as of 1975, was no longer considered a State Park and all references designating it as such on signage and in promotional literature were removed.

Facility maintenance problems grew throughout the term of the lease and disagreement ensued over which party should be responsible. Consequently, no major repairs were undertaken and the Lodge began to be referred to as “dilapidated.” In 1977, by mutual agreement with DNR, Quarry Management terminated its lease.

Unable to find another lessee, and given the building’s condition, DNR recommended selling Mont Chateau. A resolution to sell the property for not less than \$1,000,000 was passed during the 1977 session of the WV Legislature but was later reconsidered and rejected at the urging of delegates from Monongalia County, home of Mont Chateau. Repurposing the lodge was explored; the U.S. Department of Labor’s Job Corps was interested but then deemed it “not large enough...and too expensive to convert [for] our purpose.”

Mont Chateau Becomes the Home of the West Virginia Geological Survey (1977–today)

In June 1977, Governor Jay Rockefeller announced that Mont Chateau Lodge would be leased to the West Virginia Geological & Economic Survey, then housed in WVU’s White Hall and in several leased facilities in Morgantown. Of Mont

Chateau’s 42 acres, 13 would be occupied by the Geological Survey and the other 29 were partitioned from the park and eventually leased to and, in 1985, traded to the private sector. When Mont Chateau’s original construction bond was retired in 1981, the property was deeded to the Geological Survey.

Over the past 45 years, the Geological Survey has been diligent in its efforts to maintain Mont Chateau’s legacy through the rehabilitation and preservation of its facilities, enabling today’s visitors to enjoy the agency’s Museum of Natural History, Gift Shop, and beautiful grounds.

Historic Designation Sought (2022)

The West Virginia Historic Preservation Office has approved an application to nominate Mont Chateau’s land, current buildings, and remaining stone structures from the original resort as a Historic District. A formal application to the National Park Service for placement on the National Register of Historic Places is planned for this year. Increasing encroachment of commercial development in the Cheat Lake area has made the achievement of this goal critical.

Visitors are welcome at the Geological Survey, Museum and Gift Shop weekdays 8:00 – 5:00. Mont Chateau is off I-68, “Cheat Lake – Exit 10.” It’s about 45 miles (50–55 minutes) from Oakland and Deep Creek Lake, and about 70 miles from Cumberland or Pittsburgh. The address is 1 Mont Chateau Road, Morgantown, WV 26508.

For additional information, please visit the Facebook page “Historic Mont Chateau,” which offers further historical information on Mont Chateau and the surrounding Cheat Lake area – <https://www.facebook.com/groups/311784593238731>.

