

The Bottling Plant At Colonial Springs

Mike Bertram

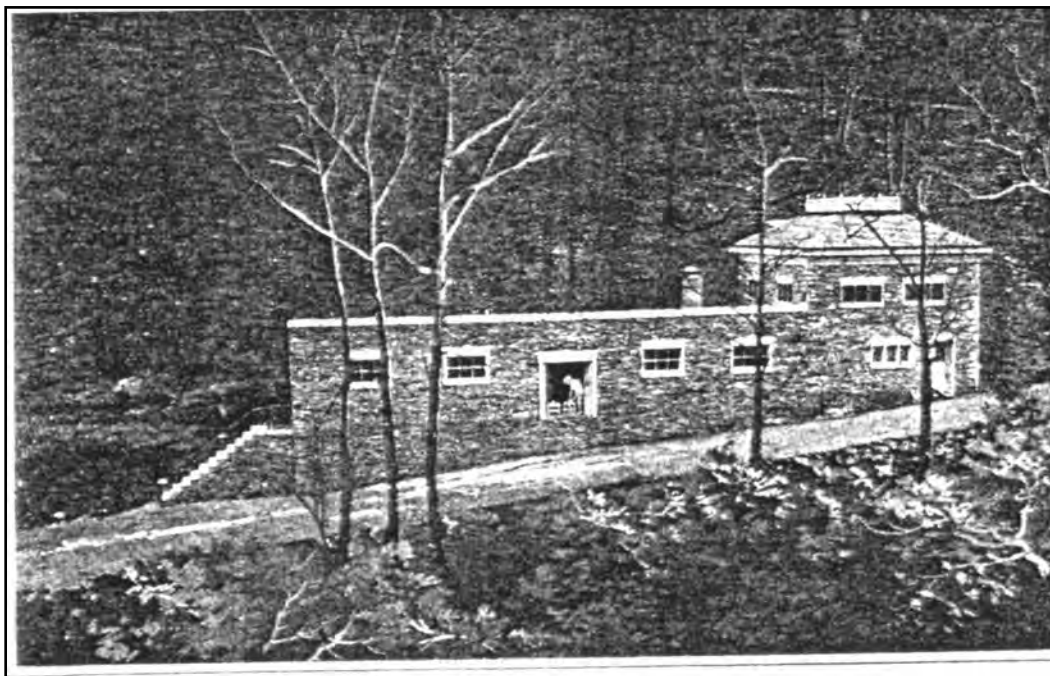


The ruins of the bottling plant. *Tim Lander, 2010.*

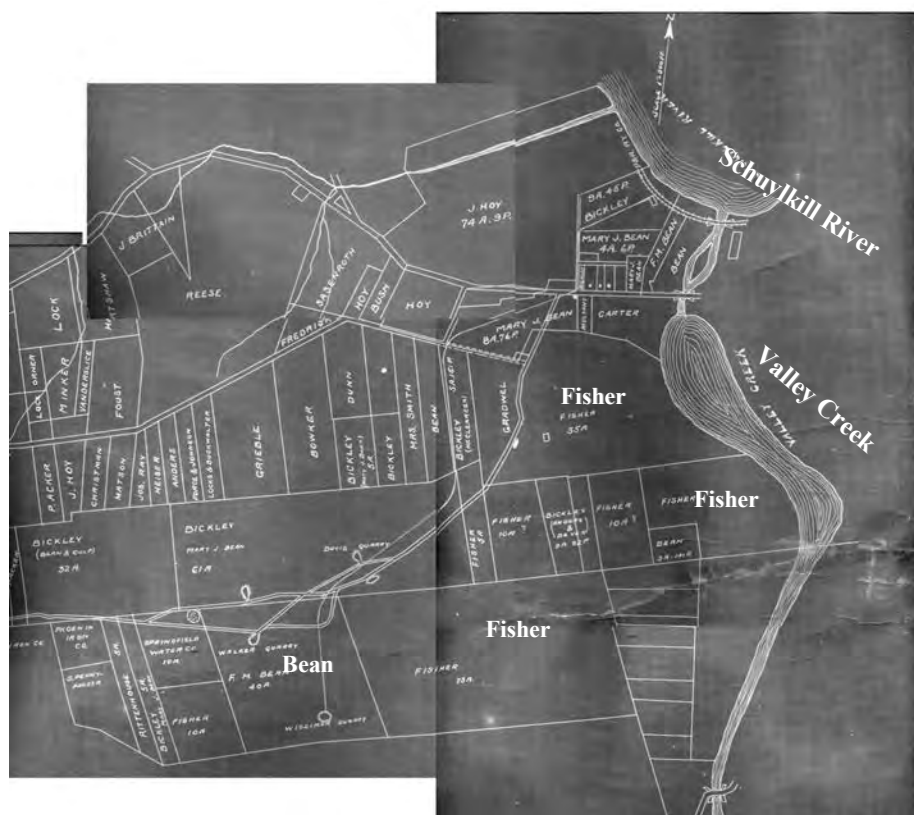
If you descend the eastern end of the Horse-Shoe Trail in Valley Forge Park you will come down the steep trail from Mount Misery, turn a hairpin bend, and then you will see a rectangular, roofless building with a concrete spring house hidden behind it. This is the Colonial Springs Bottling Plant. It is not clear exactly when water from the spring was first commercially bottled, but it was probably after General Benjamin Franklin Fisher purchased the property in 1895. General Fisher was a Civil War hero, serving in the Signal Corps. He was captured while on a reconnaissance expedition, but managed to escape from Libby Prison in Richmond, Virginia. It took Fisher twelve days of hardship to return to the Union side. Later he was promoted to the position of Chief Signal Officer of the United States Army.

After the war he practiced as a lawyer, living initially on Valley Park Road in Schuylkill Township. He and his brother, C. Arthur Fisher, purchased many small contiguous plots and assembled a large tract of land on Mount Misery. In 1895, Fisher purchased the Colonial Springs plot from Mary J. Bean, another significant

land owner in Valley Forge village. She was President of the Bean Sand Company. The Fisher tract stretched from Colonial Springs down to Valley Creek in one direction and across the mountain to the top of the Sterling's Quarters Farm, the present Park boundary, in the other direction (see the 1906 plan below). Later in his life he moved from Valley Park Road to a house at Colonial Springs.



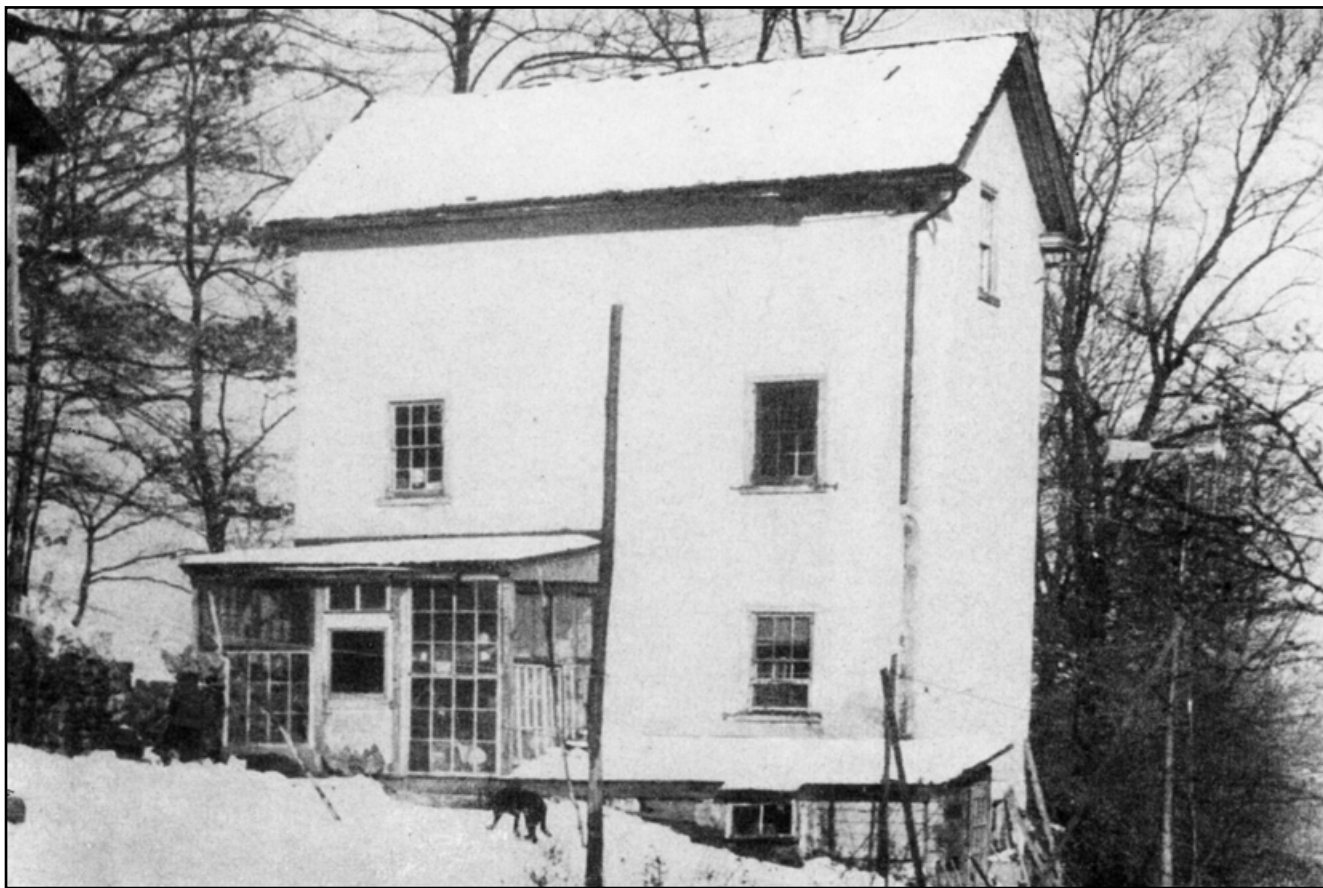
Bottling Plant from *Valley Forge Guide*, 1910



Valley Forge Village Plan, 1906. *Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society Archives*.

There was another house adjacent to Fisher's home at Colonial Springs. It was known as Slab Tavern, although it does not seem to ever have held a liquor license. It was once believed by many that General von Steuben was quartered at the house with his aides during the 1777-1778 encampment. After the Park took over the area, they decided that the house was not of Revolutionary age, and demolished both buildings in 1965. The foundations of the houses can be seen opposite the bottling plant.

Helen Davis Debus, a lifelong Valley Forge resident, remembers the Colonial Springs area. "There was a barn and an ice house and another little stone house and then there was a building called Slab Tavern, where people used to ride over the hill and stop there. And



Slab Tavern. *Edward Pinkowski.*

they sold – I don't think they sold wine and intoxicants – but they used to sell homemade drinks and gingersnaps and things like that – they rode over the hill on horseback. It is torn down now. My father tried to talk the Park out of pulling down the house.”¹

Fisher granted a lease to the Colonial Springs Company in 1908 to use the waters of Cold Spring (presumably an earlier name for Colonial Springs). Prior to this agreement, in 1900, C. T. Chase agreed to purchase at least 5000 gallons of Cold Springs water per month from Fisher.

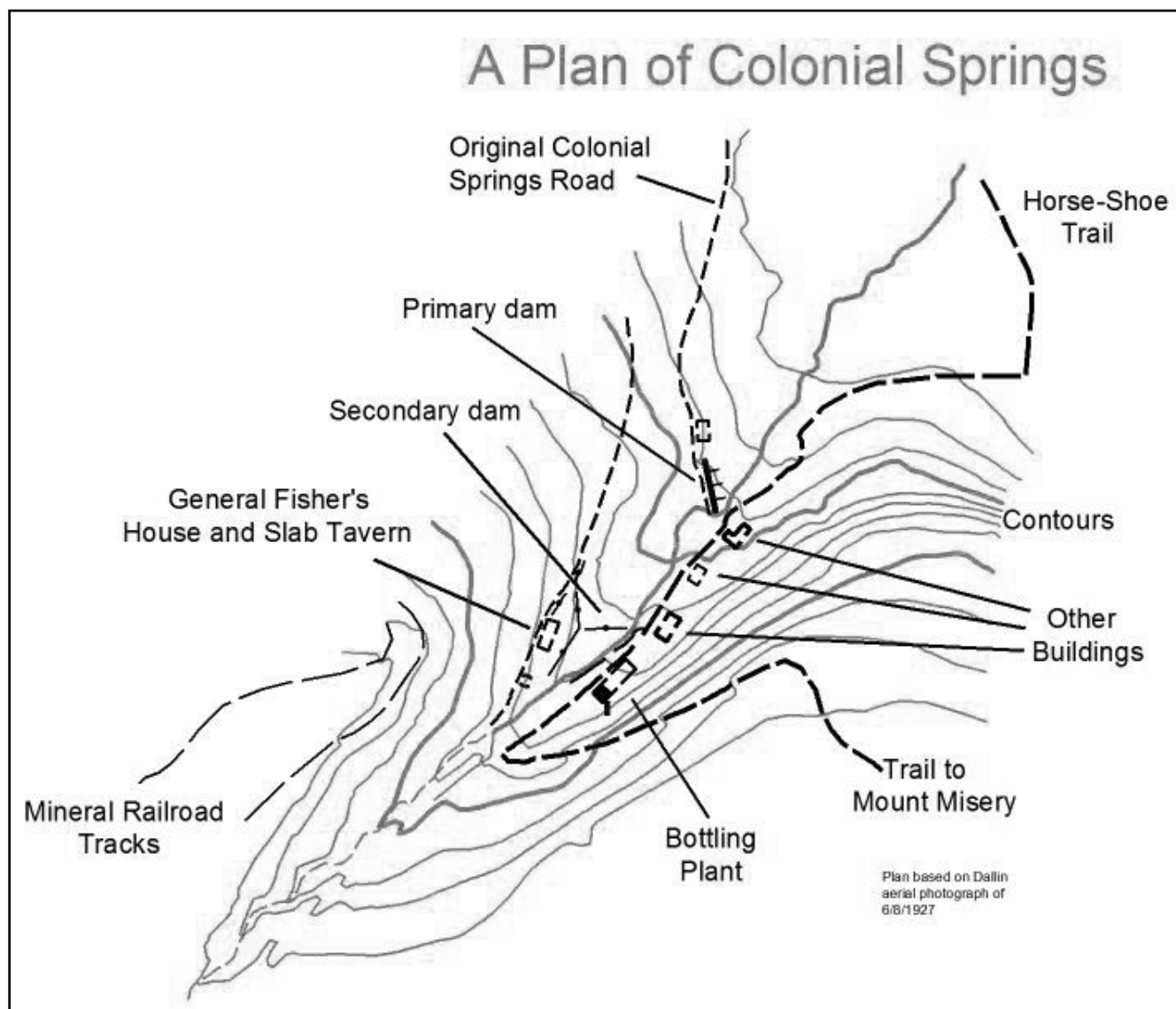
General Fisher died in 1915. His heirs sold the tract to Charles Hires, of Hires Root Beer fame. There is no evidence that the Hires Company ever made root beer at the Springs. The Hires company's main plant in the area was in Malvern. It is not clear whether the water from the Spring was used to make root beer in Malvern. The Colonial Springs tract was purchased by Valley Forge State Park in the 1930s and the bottling of the spring water stopped.



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1. Interviews by Nancy Loane, 2005 (see <http://www.schuylkilltwp.com/information.htm>) and Mike Bertram (unpublished).

Charles Elmer Hires (1851 – 1937).
Lower Merion Historical Society.



The plan above was derived from an old aerial photograph. The need for the two dams is not clear. The first dam did provide a bed for Colonial Springs Road to reach the bottling plant. The second dam may have been used to control the flow of water, as the area between the two dams seems to have been farmed at one time.

Helen Davis Debus also remembers the bottling plant in operation. She says that the building was filled with glass pipes which transported the water from the spring to the bottling stations. Hires sold spring water under the name of the Purock Water Company. It is now a long time since the water of the springs was bottled, but the building and area continue to fascinate the many hikers on Mount Misery and are a significant part of the history of Valley Forge village.



Purock Bottles. www.morphyauctions.com

Charles Elmer Hires

Charles Elmer Hires, who developed a beverage he called “root beer” in 1875, was the first soft drink entrepreneur. His company paved the way for giants such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi. A Philadelphia-based pharmacist by profession, Hires was only 24 when he created his world-famous concoction, which he originally sold as dry concentrate that needed to be mixed with water and several other ingredients. He later went on to develop a second successful business as a noted manufacturer of condensed milk.

Charles Elmer Hires was born on August 19, 1851, on his family’s farm outside of Roadstown, New Jersey. He was the sixth of 10 children of John Dare Hires and Mary (Williams) Hires, who counted among her ancestors Martha Washington, wife of President George Washington. Despite such distinguished ties, the Hires family was not a wealthy one. Young Charles had very little formal education and held his first job before he reached his teens.

Hires was married twice, first to Clara Kate Smith in 1875 and then, following her death in 1910, to Emma Waln in 1911. He had two daughters and three sons, one of whom, Harrison Streater Hires, served as vice president of Charles E. Hires Company from 1923 to 1948.

Hires was a Republican and a devout Quaker who financed the restoration of the Merion Meeting House in Merion, Pennsylvania, where William Penn had worshipped. He even wrote a book about the project entitled *A Short Historical Sketch of the Merion Meeting House* (1917). Hires died of a stroke on July 31, 1937, at his home in Haverford, Pennsylvania, while preparing to leave for a fishing trip. He is buried in Westminister Cemetery near Cynwyd, Pennsylvania.

Hires was only 12 years old when he went to work at a local pharmacy. Intrigued by the profession, he moved to Philadelphia four years later to take a similar job. By 1867, Hires was working at a wholesale drug house while attending night classes at the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and the Jefferson Medical College. He then headed to the town of Bridgeton, Pennsylvania, where he helped operate a local pharmacy in partnership with two other men. The venture was short-lived, however, and Hires soon moved back to Philadelphia. In December 1869, at the age of only 18, he borrowed some money and opened his own pharmacy.

Not long after launching his business, Hires happened to make a fortunate discovery. Workmen in his neighborhood were digging the foundation for a building when they came across a strange-looking, clayish type of soil. Hires knew that this material was “fuller’s earth,” a popular item at the time for removing grease spots from wool clothing. He arranged to have a large amount of the unusual clay brought to his house and dumped into his cellar, where he and a helper shaped it into cakes and packaged it as “Hires Special Cleaner.” He then sold his product to wholesale drug houses and managed to earn \$6,000, a fairly substantial sum of money in those days. The success of Hires Special Cleaner enabled the young pharmacist to pay off all of his debts.

In 1875, Hires and his bride were honeymooning at a New Jersey boarding farm when they tasted the landlady’s special pie mixture of sassafras bark, wintergreen, sarsaparilla root, hops, juniper berries, pipsissewa, and other herbs. Hires returned home with the recipe for this sweet concoction and soon began experimenting with it. Assisted by two medical college professors, he was able to develop and then market a dry concentrate of the recipe that could be mixed with water, sugar, and yeast to produce a sweet drink.

As was common practice at that time, Hires sold his soft drink not merely as a refreshing drink but as a sort of medicine. It also represented a morally upright alternative to beer and liquor, an important plus lending to

the strong anti-alcohol sentiments that were then sweeping the nation. In fact, Hires originally planned to market his product as "Hires Herb Tea" but changed his mind after receiving a piece of invaluable business advice from a friend, Dr. Russell H. Conwell. A minister, author, and founder of Philadelphia's Temple University, Conwell reportedly told Hires that tough Pennsylvania coal miners would never drink herb tea, but they *would* drink something with "beer" in the name. On the basis of this suggestion, Hires named his concentrated mix "root beer."

Hires introduced the new concoction in 1876 at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. It was a great success, prompting him to start selling it outside the local area through pharmacy soda fountains or as a mix to be brewed at home. Before long, customers were able to purchase 25-cent packages of the concentrate, enough to make 5 gallons of root beer. By the early 1880s, Hires began selling three-ounce bottles of root beer in liquid form. He advertised heavily in local newspapers like the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* and quickly created a booming market for his product.

Realizing that root beer's appeal could easily extend beyond the Philadelphia area, Hires decided to promote his drink to a nationwide clientele. He thus became the first person to purchase a color advertisement on the back page of the *Ladies' Home Journal* (at the time, Coca-Cola was barely known outside its hometown of Atlanta, Georgia.). Hires Root Beer soon became America's soft drink.



Victorian-era advertising card, front and back. *City of Toronto Archives, Larry Becker Collection*

Source of this article: Online Encyclopedia, "<http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/articles/pages/6274/Hires-Charles-Elmer.html>">Hires, Charles Elmer - Overview, Personal Life, Career Details