

Tar Springs Resort

Breckinridge County, KY

By Jerry Long
c.2026



Inscription: "Four miles south. A fashionable health resort of 1840s which had the unique attraction of a 100-foot cliff from which tar bubbled while from its base flowed eleven springs, each with different type of mineral water. Indians knew and used these curative waters. Wiley B. Rutledge, Justice of U.S. Supreme Court, 1943-49, was born, 1894, at Tar Springs resort."

Historical Highway Marker erected in 1966 by the Kentucky Historical Society and Kentucky Department of Highways. (Marker Number 934.) Marker is in Cloverport, Breckinridge County, KY. It is at the intersection of West Street and Verden Street, on the right when traveling west on West Street.





The Tar Springs Hotel



Morning Courier, Louisville, KY, Thursday, 25 July 1844, p.2:

VISITERS AT THE SPRINGS. – We understand that the principal watering places in Kentucky are already crowded with visitors. ‘The anticipations of a brilliant season at the different Springs, will be more than realized.... The Tar Springs, at Cloverport, a half day’s travel below Louisville, and situated within three miles of the river, are rapidly coming into notoriety. They are situated in the midst of a most beautifully picturesque country, and are managed with tact and liberality.



Morning Courier, Louisville, KY, Monday, 16 June 1845, p.2:

For the Morning Courier and Democrat

MESSRS. EDITORS. – Having but recently visited the “far famed” Tar Springs, situated in Breckenridge county, about four miles from Cloverport, I must beg the liberty of a few remarks concerning them.

Mr. Noble, the present proprietor of the Springs, has spared no pains in making all necessary improvements – indeed, he has not had only in view the convenience of his visitors, but has, also, exhibited a degree of good taste that reflects much credit upon him. Suffice it to say, the most fastidious cannot but be delighted.

Imagine yourself standing beneath the brow of a gigantic rock, whose. Proud apex almost seems to kiss the sky, and whose winding sides ever and anon peep above and sink beneath the dense foliage of lofty trees that entwine their branches and rear themselves in every direction. Far above you hangs the jutting brink which extends so far beyond the base as to form a complete roof

and almost shut out the light of Heaven. At your feet gurgle two streams of sulphur water, which gush from the side of the cliff'; upon the surface of the streams is borne the tar in detached particles, which is collected with the water in vessels for that purpose. Nature has, here, been guilty of one of her wildest freaks. Her magic hand has formed a strange though fascinating association of scenery – the rugged and time-blackened rocks, the giant trees, the verdant and gently, sloping lawns, and the sweet and varied notes of thousands of “natures sweet warblers,” form a variety and rarity of scenery, and possess a rural charm, sufficient in themselves to restore to health the invalid, and make more buoyant and cheerful, those, on whose cheeks the bloom of health may glow.

For variety and grandeur of scenery, excellency of accommodations, and restorative qualities of water, the Tar Springs undoubtedly stand unrivalled.

During some future visit, I shall endeavor to give you a more correct and minute description of this wild and picturesque scenery, together with some of the ‘sayings and doings’ of the visitors of the Tar Springs.

SYLVIAS.



Daily Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Wednesday, 15 March 1893, p.1:



The Tar Springs property, four miles south of Cloverport, is to be sold at the courthouse door in Hardinsburg next Monday by Master Commissioner V. G. Babbage, to satisfy a judgment in Breckenridge circuit court. The property, was bought a few years ago by J. D. Powers, W. B. Armendt, S. M. Deane, R. M. Conway, W. V. McCracken and R. R. Pierce. Their plan was to put up a fine hotel and run it as a watering place, but through the failure of some of the stockholders to come with their share of the money, and for other reasons, the hotel was never built. When the deferred payments fell due the notes were not met and suit was instituted. Two years ago, when the suit was brought, some of the stockholders said the reason the notes were not paid was that they preferred to let the property sell under the hammer and buy it in on account of the fact that

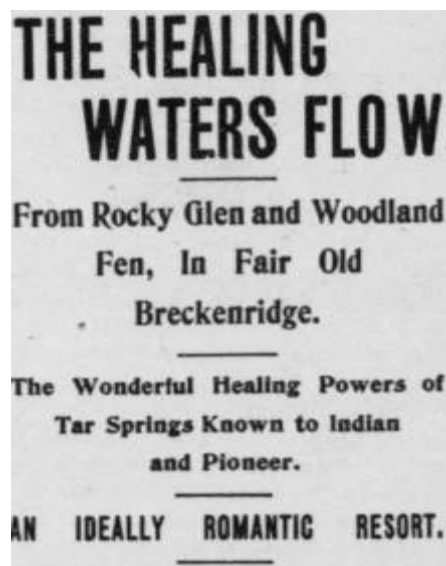
others of the stockholders failed in their obligations. It is now doubtful if they carry out this intention, and it will probably go to outside parties or perhaps to the original owners for the debt.

Before the war, when the property was in the hands of Dr. Kennedy and a partner, of Cincinnati, there was no popular place in the south than Tar Springs. The wealthiest people of the country frequented the place in summer. The war came and the patronage dropped off to almost nothing. The hotel was burned and the numerous cottages, some of them quite handsome, went to rack. A few years ago, Dr. Kennedy, who still owned the place, built a cheap cottage or two and had the place run in a desultory way. A good many people, willing to put up with the miserable accommodations for the sake of the fine water, went there for a season or two, but even this patronage was driven away and fire again cleaned up the buildings.

The present owners based their hopes on the past and put up some money, but they seem to have backed out, and it is probable that the fine old-time summer resort will soon be only a memory.



Breckenridge News, Cloverport, KY, Wednesday, 4 May 1898, p.6:



The medicinal virtues of the numerous mineral springs of Breckenridge co. are traditional. They were known to the Indians long before the dawn of the white man's civilization on this continent.

This was neutral ground and the tribal foemen respected the right of friend and foe to find surcease from pain and recuperate broken health by the use of the healing waters of the springs.

It was not until the white man came that the war-whoop was raised and the subtle arrow sent on its mission of death in the great wilderness surrounding these springs. Away back, in the early days, the pioneers placed implicit faith in the curative properties of the waters of the famous Tar Springs.

When broken in health they would repair to this fountain of healing and the use of its magic waters would mend them physically.

Year by year, as the country advanced in population and civilization, the fame of Tar Springs grew, until just before the war it became one of the best and most fashionable health resorts in Kentucky.

Wealthy planters and their families used to come from miles around to the springs and camp for a month or more.

The use of the waters, together with the out door life that was spent by the invalids worked miraculous cures and the place grew in favor.

The Civil war, with its wild alarms, its carnage and its guerilla warfare put a stop to the practice of camping out at the springs. The broken fortunes that followed the war prevented many of the oldest devotees of the resort from coming back and it is only in a desultory way that it is now visited by health seekers.



Famous Tar Springs

TAR SPRINGS.

The famous Tar Springs are located four miles south of Cloverport. They are so situated that a boulevard or fine bicycle path can be easily built to them from the city and they can be also reached by the Victoria railroad. They are situated in one of most beautiful and picture que places la Breckenridge county. The massive rock cliff that towers above the springs, clothed with a mass of verdure and carpeted with the rarest of mosses and ferns makes it an ideally romantic spot. The waters of the springs are impregnated with magnesia, sulphur and a peculiar mineral tar that is wonderfully healing to the lungs. The experience and cures of three quarters of a century demonstrates these waters to be nature's own remedy for pulmonary complaints.

The Tar Springs property is owned by the "Henderson Route." It in an ideal place for a fashionable watering place and the owners are willing to lease or sell the property to any party or parties who erect a hotel thereon.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Monday 18 April 1988, pp.1C & 4C:

**Out and About in Breckinridge County:
Memories etched in stone
around Tar Springs Resort**

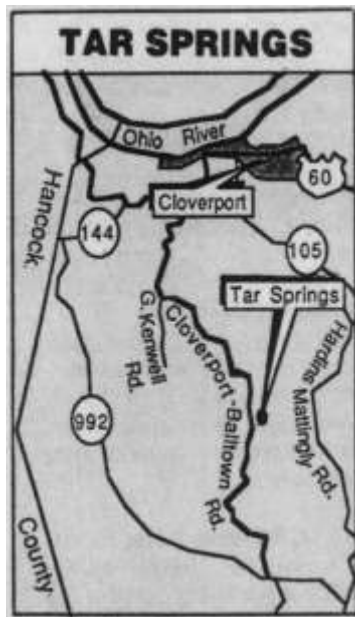
By Laura Skillman, Messenger-Inquirer

Imagine paying \$1.50 a night to stay in a modern, grandly styled hotel with tennis courts, croquet, hunting and dancing.

Impossible? Not if you were living at the turn of the century and decided to spend some time at the Tar Springs Resort in Breckinridge County.

What brought people to the resort in great numbers were 11 mineral springs located around the base of a 100-foot horseshoe-shaped cliff.

Water from the springs was said to have curing powers. People from around the country would travel to the resort about four miles south of Cloverport to drink and bathe in these healing water.



Many doctors at the time also acknowledged the water's powers.

Each spring contained different concentrations of minerals, which meant they were supposedly good at healing various ailments.

Tar and blue sulfur water were reported to be splendid remedies for diseases of the kidney and bladder.

Other water at the resort was reported to help relieve gout, rheumatism, skin diseases and stomach troubles.

People could purchase water from the springs. Tar water was sold in 5- gallon jugs for 25 cents per gallon. Spring Tar was sold at \$2 per quart.

In a 1908 brochure about the springs, the hotel is described as containing electric lights, steam heat and water works.

The hotel was described as being exquisitely decorated. In the dining room and bedrooms, the walls were hand decorated with paintings.

Also at the springs were a row of cottages. These 25 cottages were fully furnished. According to the brochure, tenants needed to bring only blankets, towels and bed linens.

The first hotel owner brought in orchestras for each season. Tourists arrived by steamboat at Cloverport or came over land. Later, the railroad would bring visitors to the springs.

Another hotel – The Cloverport Hotel, in town – worked in conjunction with the Tar Springs Hotel giving accommodations to those en route to the resort.

Long before the springs became a popular resort, Indians knew of them and used the area for camping. Along part of the cliff are some Indian petroglyphs the state is interested in listing in some type of national register, said Charles Shircliff of Louisville, who owns the land.

And even after whites replaced the Indians, initials and dates of bygone eras were still being etched in the stone surrounding the now silent cliff.

Around the cliff are large boulders that broke from above many years ago and abundant foliage, including huge beech trees.

The shady places along the cliff seem tailor-made for romantic walks and carriage rides. Several stories surround the resort, including one told to Shircliff by several people:

A honeymooning couple had taken their carriage around the road to the top of the cliff when their horse reared, throwing the couple off the cliff to their deaths.

One night, fire swept through the original hotel, destroying it. The owner did not rebuild.

The property was sold, and soon another hotel was built on the site.

But in the 1920s, the popularity of the springs subsided and the resort was closed.

The hotel and cottages have long since disappeared. Now they live on only in the memories of those who were around in the resort's heydays.

But the beautiful scenery remains.

Several people have owned the property and discussed various uses for it.

Joe Martin of Louisville owned the property for a time and planned to use it as a boxing camp, Shircliff said.

Martin was the trainer for Cassius Clay, now Muhammad Ali, and planned to train boxers. But when Clay joined professional boxing, he changed trainers and Martin stopped working on the Tar Springs gym, Shircliff said.

Shircliff, who was the caretaker at the property for a time when Martin owned it, bought the property in 1977. Shircliff since has built a lake there.

The location is rather remote – off the main roads – and it is not open to the public.

Shircliff's family spends most of its summer weekends at Tar Springs and would someday like to build a home there.

So many parts of our past simply vanish for one reason or another. Will what is commonplace for us today be only a memory in the not so distant future?



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Saturday, 30 May 1992,
Kentucky Portrait section p.28:

Tar Springs doesn't sound
like a resort, but it was

By Glenn Hodges, Messenger-Inquirer

Tar Springs located about 4 miles south of Cloverport, was once the site of one of the most popular health and pleasure resorts in the South.

Waters flowing from the base of a 100-foot cliff there contained magnesia, sulfur and a peculiar mineral tar that people believed could cure a list of illnesses ranging from disorders of the lungs to rheumatism.

The springs had been in use long before white pioneers moved into the area. Mound Builders had discovered them more than 1,000 years ago and Indians not only used the mineral waters for the healing of wounds but made the top of the cliff a favorite camping site.

Naturalist and painter John James Audubon is said to have spent weeks there drinking the water and classifying the birds he saw.

Before the Civil War, the springs were extremely popular as wealthy planters and their families came from miles around and camped for a month or more.

Guerrilla warfare in the county caused Tar Springs to suffer a loss of popularity during the war, but it made a comeback in the years after the conflict. Dr. James Hunt of Cincinnati heard about the springs and liked them so much that he bought up all the land around them and converted the area into a summer health resort.

The rocks and trees around the springs area provided a beautiful view that attracted tourists. The cliff forms a horseshoe around the springs and the base of the cliff was covered with verdure and rare forms of moss and ferns.

On the large rocks running directly south of the springs are three long sloping ridges, where Hunt began construction in about 1870. A two-story hotel was erected on the center ridge and long rows of cottages were built on the east and west ridges.

When Hunt opened the doors of the resort, steamboats from Pittsburgh to New Orleans brought people from the East and South to test the health giving waters.

An orchestra played every night during the season in the hotel dining room that was converted into a ballroom, and chefs were employed to prepare the best of foods.

The success of the resort was interrupted on a night in 1878 when a fire destroyed the hotel. The financial losses were so great that Hunt decided not to rebuild. Several attempts were made to revive the resort in the following years. A Louisville syndicate took control of the springs in 1889 and put it back in business.

In the summer of 1894, W.B. Rutledge, A Cloverport minister, and his pregnant wife went to Tar Springs for a vacation. Soon after they arrived, she went into labor and on Aug. 20, 1894, delivered a son named Wiley B. Rutledge Jr. He was the only child ever born at the Tar Springs Health Resort, and in the 1940s, he was appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court by President Franklin Roosevelt.

In 1904, W.T. Halliday of Chicago purchased the Tar Springs land from Hunt and announced plans to reopen the resort on a much grander scale. About two years later, a new hotel was built and 25 fully furnished summer cottages were added.

Among the other improvements were tennis and croquet courts, a merry-go-round, dancing pavilion, skating rink, a post office, a store and church. Free transportation was offered to steamboats and trains in Cloverport, and a Fourth of July picnic became a big attraction.

As the years passed, fights, a rough reputation and unsatisfactory living facilities led to the downfall of Tar Springs. "Poor management and the competition of the big Masonic picnic in Hardinsburg, often attended by as many as 6,000 people, practically ended the resort's annual

picnic and there was a decline in the number of hotel guests," the Breckinridge County Herald-News reported in a 1987 story.

Eventually the tourist trade began to decline, and after several years of struggling, the financially strapped resort was sold at public auction on Oct. 10, 1910. Its management changed hands several times for many years thereafter, but the resort never regained the splendor it enjoyed in its heyday. It closed during the 1920s.



**Breckinridge County, Kentucky History, by Guida Goodman-Snavely
(Elizabethtown, KY: Ancestral Trails Historical Society, 2005) pp.30-32:**

TAR SPRINGS

One of nature's wonders is located four miles south of Cloverport and is known as "Tar Springs". Back in the early days it was referred to as the fountain of health and happiness. The pioneers placed implicit faith in the curative properties of the water from the springs.

The mineral waters flow from a rock formation, which is 100 feet high. The massive cliff was carpeted with rare mosses and fern making it an ideally romantic spot. There are twelve springs each with a different mineral composition. The springs come out at the base of the cliff, which forms a horseshoe.

An analysis of a quart of water by Professor E. S. Wayne of Cincinnati is as follows: magnesium carbonate, 1.46; calcium carbonate, 4.41; sodium sulphate, .65; magnesium chloride, 1.25; ferrous sulphate, .19; sodium sulphate, .03; magnesium sulphate, 44.27; aluminum sulphate, .03; silicate of potassium, 4.32; sodium magnesium, 4.32; carbonic acid, 1.41; oxygen, .06; nitrogen, .55 and mineral tar in large quantities.

In the 1840s, people came from miles around to see the natural wonder to camp out, bath and drink of the healing mineral water. It was widely known through the Mississippi River Valley. William Ashley owned the property around this time.

A post office was established in 1844 and closed in 1845. The in-coming trains were met twice a day to pick up the mail. There was also a small store on the grounds.

Dr. Hunt of Cincinnati, Ohio built a brick hotel here in the 1850s. It was elaborately decorated and furnished with the finest. During the busy season there was an orchestra and fine chefs. Nothing was too good for the hotel. It became known as one of the finest and most fashionable health resorts in the state of Kentucky. In 1887, during the peak of the season a fire broke out and completely destroyed the hotel.

In July of 1891, G. W. Jordan owned the property; admission for use of the water and grounds was 25 cents.

"Tar Springs" was sold at the courthouse in March of 1892. Mr. J. K. McCracken purchased the property for \$7,200.

On March 22, 1893, the Master Commissioner sold "Tar Springs" again at the courthouse door. Mr. George Allison, of Louisville bought the property for \$6,740.

On July 20, 1894, Wiley B. Rutledge was born at "Tar Springs" and lived in Cloverport for five years. He was a lawyer, statesman, and associate professor of law at Washington University, later dean of the University and professor and dean of various other colleges. In 1943, President Roosevelt appointed him associate of U. S. Supreme Court.

The first wedding to take place here was on September 29, 1894. Miss Lena Allen and Leonard Weatherholt were the bride and groom. Rev. Ellis of Rockport officiated.

W. T. Haliday, of Chicago, came to Cloverport and bought both The Cloverport Inn and "Tar Springs" in 1904. He soon started rebuilding Tar Springs. Running south of the springs are three ridges. On the center ridge, Mr. Haliday built a new three story wood hotel of cheap materials and the furnishings were bought at junk stores. The dining room walls were covered with beautiful murals. Mr. Haliday spared no cost when it came to painting the hotel and every room was handsomely painted. The two bridal chambers were painted in panels of pink roses and chrysanthemums.

On the east and west side ridges was a long row of cottages. There was a new and better road built that had a rustic bridge across Tar Fork Creek. The entrance was graced by two high pillars of stone, which added a lot to the magnificence to the park. Recreation facilities consisted of a tennis court, a dance pavilion, skating rink, croquet and a merry-go-round. The hotel rates were \$1.50 per day or \$7.00 to \$10.00 per week. The cottages rented for \$6.00 to \$10.00 per week. The transportation from Cloverport was free.

Mr. Haliday's Brochure reads as follows: "VISIT THE MAGIC WATERS OF WONDERFUL TAR SPRINGS

"A Majestic cliff forms a background to the springs and towers above the entire surroundings. It is over 100 feet high and from its base flows the mineral springs, eleven in number. The white sulfur and tar water is noted far and wide as a cure for stomach trouble, skin disease, suppressed menstruation, gout, rheumatism and chronic catarrh.

The hotel has steam heat and water works. Rooms are fully furnished. Bring only towels and linens."

Legend has it that one of Breckinridge County's first medical operations was performed at "Tar Springs." It seems that a gentleman was very ill and someone came to town to get Dr. McDonald to go and attend to the gentleman. When Dr. McDonald arrived he realized that the gentleman was suffering from appendicitis so he set up a make shift operating room. He took bed sheets, tacked them between the trees forming a roof to catch leaves. Next, he moved the kitchen table out under the sheets and performed the surgery right there in the woods.

July 4th celebrations at Tar Springs were some of the largest events of the year. The celebrations soon got out of hand and there were fights.

In 1906, a Sunday school was organized. Lillie Parker was superintendent; J. R. Sanders, secretary; Margaret Sanders, Carrie May Patterson and Viola Macy were teachers. The little church was known as the United Brethren.

In July 1907, the little church, which had just been built by a few followers of that faith, was taken over by the Methodist church. Rev. B. M. Currie, of Cloverport, and Mr. W. T. Haliday, proprietor of the Tar Springs, assumed the indebtedness.

Around 1908, "Tar Springs" was getting a rough reputation and the living conditions were less than satisfactory now. Poor management and the competition of the big Masonic Picnic in Hardinsburg practically ended the resorts annual picnic on the 4th of July.

After years of struggling, the financially troubled Tar Springs Resort was again sold at public auction to the Sanitarium Company.

The Elbert Tindell family owned the farm and lived there for several years.

In the 1940s, one of the huge overhanging cliffs served as a tobacco barn, housing the entire five-acre patch.

The property remained idle until 1969, when Joe Martin, Sr., a Louisville resident bought it with the intentions of building a boxing center for the youth of Kentucky. Martin spent several months and many dollars clearing the grounds and constructing a training barn and remodeling the house near the grounds.

The Martin's lived in Louisville and would come to "Tar Springs" for the weekend. About every weekend they would find items had been taken from their home or the grounds. When they returned home one week-end, they found their home had been badly damaged by vandals. Mr. Martin stopped construction and his plans for the boxing center, as he thought it was no longer worthwhile.

Charles Shircliff of Louisville made Mr. Martin a reasonable offer for the property and he gladly accepted the offer. The Shircliffs have made the property their home and the property is no longer open to the public.

Information for this section is from James Carter, Margaret Smith, Grace Bandy and newspaper clippings.



Herald-News, Hardinsburg, KY, Wednesday, 8 August 2018, p.1B:

A Closer Look: History in Breckinridge County

By Tiffany Cashman, Herald-News

It's sometimes hard to believe that Breckinridge County was once covered with thriving towns where now only vacant lots and overgrown wooded patches remain today. Some of the historic buildings have been demolished with modern buildings erected to stand in their foot print while others were demolished only to be forgotten completely. One such location, which has only managed to hold onto it's name, is Tar Springs.

Located just outside of Cloverport, Tar Springs was one of the biggest tourist destinations in the area during the 1800's. Originally the town housed a wood structured hotel for visitors who came to admire the beauty of the area and to drink the "miracle water" that was unique to the area. Tar Springs had 11 fresh water springs that flowed from under the cliffs and each spring had a different mineral collection in the water.

The waters were believed to have healing properties and visitors traveled from several states over to drink and bath in the natural spa. Some of the illnesses said to be cured by the waters included: stomach troubles, skin diseases, suppressed menstruation, gout, rheumatism, and chronic catarrh. Each spring was said to have different effects, for instance, the Magnesia Spring was reported to help those suffering from chronic constipation.

It was soon after the Civil War that the wooded framed hotel was replaced with a three story brick building as well as 25 cabins to house all the guests. In 1887 the railroad came through Cloverport and brought even more guests to the area allowing the small town of Tar Springs to grow.

Nothing but the three story resort, now a house, marks the area as a tourist attraction today, but the water from the eleven springs still flows down the hillside creating a natural beauty that can only be truly appreciated in person.

