Hidden in Plain Sight

The Greenbrier’s Bunker

By Bob Conte
In the darkest days of the Cold War, federal officials pondered the consequences of a devastating attack upon Washington, D.C. In the nuclear era such an attack would destroy the leadership of the government and thereby destroy the government’s ability to respond to the crisis. In the face of this danger, an ambitious program was devised that entailed the construction of emergency relocation centers — bunkers — where government leaders might reassemble in a secure location and continue to function. Underground shelters were installed at Mount Weather, Virginia; Raven Rock Mountain, Pennsylvania; Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado; and elsewhere, each with a separate purpose.

The bunker at The Greenbrier resort in White Sulphur Springs was intended for the emergency relocation of the U.S. Congress. There were several reasons why government leaders turned to The Greenbrier for assistance in this project. For one, a relationship already existed between the government and The Greenbrier, forged during World War II when the resort served two special purposes. For seven months immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the hotel was leased by the U.S. State Department as an internment center for enemy alien diplomats. German, Japanese, and Italian diplomatic personnel and their families were housed there while negotiations continued to exchange these foreign diplomats for American diplomats stranded overseas. Once the diplomats departed, in July 1942, the U.S. Army purchased the entire resort property and converted The Greenbrier into a 2,000-bed hospital. For the next four years, Ashford General Hospital — the resort’s new wartime name — admitted nearly 25,000 wounded soldiers, who recuperated on the grounds and utilized the sports facilities as part of the hospital’s mission as a rehabilitation center. [See “The West Virginia WWII Home Front: Ashford General Hospital: The Greenbrier Goes to War,” by Louis Keefer; Fall 1993.]

Ten years after the end of the war, when the government searched for a partner to serve as the location for the top-secret congressional bunker, The Greenbrier offered an attractive option because of this successful earlier relationship.

In addition, the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway line connected White Sulphur Springs directly to the center of Washington, D.C. Since the plan called for moving about 1,000 individuals 240 miles, this railroad connection was an important consideration. It also was beneficial that this same railroad, the C&O, owned The Greenbrier, helping to coordinate transportation should the need arise. In the 1950’s there was also a small airport on the resort property located one mile from the hotel, which offered the option of air travel, too.

The first official contact between the government and The Greenbrier occurred in March 1956, shortly after President Eisenhower hosted a small but well-publicized conference at the resort. (The president’s golf game with famed pro Sam...
Below: Looking across the top of the nearly completed bunker on October 31, 1960. The large pipe in the foreground was part of the exhaust system to extract smoke from diesel generators inside the bunker’s power plant. The Greenbrier is visible at left.

Early in the excavation phase of bunker construction, digging down into Copeland’s Hill behind The Greenbrier hotel in January 1959.

Snead generated considerable copy. Congressional leaders, including Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson and Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn, arranged a meeting between C&O officials and the Architect of the Capitol. From the outset the bunker project at The Greenbrier was supervised by the Architect of the Capitol, the official in charge of maintaining all buildings in Washington utilized by Congress. This organizational arrangement remained in place for the next 39 years, until the
The Greenbrier at White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia’s premier resort, has a story to tell. That tale is given five-star treatment in a book titled, *The History of The Greenbrier: America’s Resort*. Author Bob Conte, staff historian at The Greenbrier since 1978, knows he has one of the choicest jobs in the world, and his enthusiasm for his subject is evident in this attractive 224-page hardbound volume. Originally published in 1998, the book is now in its sixth printing and includes revised and updated material.

Conte takes the story of the famous inn from its roots as a wilderness spring to its development as a spa in the pioneer and colonial periods, through the opulent 1830’s to the Civil War, when it was used as a Confederate hospital and a Union outpost. Rebuilt following the war, it soon regained its stature as a gathering spot for the wealthy and famous. The “golden age” of the grand resort came with the railroad, and the inn flourished until World War II, when it was converted to military uses. Following that war, guests returned, and "Old White," as it is known informally, was back in business hosting the well-heeled and elite traveler. Hard times in the early 21st century forced a sale to new owner Jim Justice, who has recently added a casino and other attractions.

Perhaps the most important section of the book from a historical standpoint is the extensive chapter about “Project Greek Island” — the bunker. Detailed and insightful, this is without a doubt the most authoritative account of the inception, construction, maintenance, and decommissioning of the bunker available to date.

The book includes riveting photographs, showing many of the luminaries who have visited there over the years as well as advertisements, programs, and memorabilia. Conte’s text is clear and engaging, and the layout and presentation are exquisite, befitting the book’s elegant subject. *The History of The Greenbrier* sells for $29.95, plus shipping and in-state sales tax, from West Virginia Book Company; on-line at www.wvbookco.com or phone 1-888-982-1848.

official termination of the project in 1995.

Construction began on a cold, wintry day in December 1958. As soon as equipment began clearing a hill directly behind the existing hotel, an announcement to the press explained that the resort was embarking on an expansion project to add a new addition called the West Virginia Wing. In fact the new wing was a cover story to hide the construction of the underground bunker. For months officials had struggled with a difficult problem. The proposed bunker was to be as large as a football field — it would eventually measure out to 112,000 square feet — and the extensive excavation and construction would generate many questions amongst resort guests and local people. The ingenious solution was to build two buildings at one time, so that the construction of the above-ground West Virginia Wing became a plausible explanation for all the activity going on only a few hundred yards from the hotel. The underground bunker and the new hotel facilities were built simultaneously; thus the covert building disguised the covert building. One was literally stacked on top of the other. This technique came to be called “hiding it in plain sight.”

Building the bunker was a massive undertaking. Its concrete walls stand two feet thick and are reinforced with steel. Four blast doors were specially made by the Mosler Safe Company. The largest of these measures 15 feet high, more than 12 feet wide, and 19½ inches thick, weighing in excess of 28 tons. Its hinges alone weigh 1½ tons each. A parade of trucks hauled 4,000 loads of concrete, delivering an estimated 50,000 tons to the site. Once completed, the bunker was covered with steel plating and buried under 20 feet of earth. The final cost of both the bunker and the West Virginia Wing was set at just over $14 million.

The construction phase of the project ended in early 1962, when the first guests checked into the new hotel rooms in the West Virginia Wing. That wing also included a large area for The Greenbrier Clinic, which had grown significantly since its start in 1948 as a diagnostic medical facility. Most of one floor of the building was (and still is) devoted to thorough medical examinations by a team of physicians and a staff that does laboratory work as part of that diagnostic process. The
West Virginia Wing also included new conference facilities at a time when the resort was pursuing the lucrative area of group business. The new wing was clearly an attempt by The Greenbrier to stay competitive with other resorts, which only made for a more effective cover story.

Certainly this whole process generated rumors that there was more to the story of the big construction project on the hill than met the eye. For years people whispered they had heard that some kind of bomb shelter was actually built and that it was for the president to use in case of war. Government and Greenbrier officials consistently denied these rumors. More importantly they were able to control access — absolutely no unauthorized person ever actually entered the facility — so that rumors remained unsubstantiated speculation. And The Greenbrier itself made an effective cover story. Who would build a bunker at such a lavish and famously expensive resort that was best known for its golf pro, Sam Snead, and its legendary interior decorator, Dorothy Draper, and catered to powerful business leaders and international high-society figures such as the Duke and Duchess of Windsor?

For 30 years the congressional emergency relocation center was maintained at a constant state of operational readiness. Selected members of The Greenbrier’s staff, primarily in the engineering department, underwent
the government’s clearance process and signed nondisclosure agreements in order to carry out routine maintenance work. Had war broken out any time during that 30-year period, hundreds of members of Congress and hundreds of their staff would have been quickly transported to The Greenbrier. So it was imperative that the bunker was immediately available and accessible.

The bunker contained dormitories with bunk beds, a cafeteria with freezers for food, meeting rooms, offices, a medical clinic, and media equipment as well as an extensive communications center. Two small auditoriums were designed to serve as House and Senate chambers, while a large Exhibit Hall could accommodate joint sessions. At the heart of the operation was a power plant, where diesel generators could supply electricity. A filtration system was in place to purify air contaminated by nuclear fallout. Three 25,000-gallon storage tanks held fresh water from a nearby well, and another three 14,000-gallon tanks held fuel oil.

In contrast to the five-star hospitality offered at the resort itself, the bunker at The Greenbrier provided spartan accommodations at best for sequestered members of the U.S. Congress. A large shower room offered wrapped bars of soap but no privacy. False windows came with wooden frames and painted country scenes. A pathological waste incinerator was there to dispose of all manner of materials, including bodies, while guns, straitjackets, and riot gear were also in place, if needed.

Bringing in new equipment, keeping the food supply fresh, changing filters, and upgrading communications were tasks overseen not only by employees of The Greenbrier but also a small group of government personnel who operated under another cover, a consulting company called Forsythe Associates. Posing as audio-visual consultants, this group of about a dozen persons actually maintained the bunker’s sophisticated radio, television, and telephone systems so that the U.S. Congress could stay in touch with the outside world and also work in concert with other elements of the government.

These complex arrangements and procedures remained in effect from 1962 until 1992. The Greenbrier functioned as an ideal location not only because the resort seemed such an unlikely place for something as ominous as a bunker but because the large scale of maintaining such an extensive property also offered opportunities to conceal the importation of supplies and equipment. It is a testament to how pervasive were the preparations for conflict during the Cold War that something as improbable as a luxury resort famed for its beautiful natural setting, its impeccable golf courses, fine dining, and genteel aura of style was
This blast door protecting an interior entrance to the bunker was hidden by a moving panel. The huge concrete-and-steel door was located just inches behind one wall of the lavishly decorated foyer leading to the hotel's Exhibit Hall. Photograph by Tyler Evert.

in fact an undisclosed but integral part of the national defense system. Between the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Cold War came to an end. Was the emergency relocation center at The Greenbrier still necessary in the post-Cold War environment? Could the fortifications designed to withstand weaponry of the late 1950’s hold up to the high-tech nuclear arsenal of the 1990’s? Did “Project Greek Island,” as the bunker was known in code, still have a useful role? Apparently there were those in the government who thought not, because the bunker’s existence was leaked to a reporter for the Washington Post, and a lengthy article appeared in the May 31, 1992, Sunday magazine that described the facility in such detail that it could no longer be denied.

The next day the leadership of the U.S. Congress announced that it no longer supported the bunker operation. Over the next three years, the legal relationship between The Greenbrier and the government was disentangled and the equipment inside the bunker was physically removed and transferred to other government properties. On August 1, 1995, the contractual agreement between the two parties officially lapsed by mutual consent. The bunker became property of The Greenbrier.

A few months later the once “most secret place in America” opened to the press and public, causing a sensation recorded in hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles as well as numerous television programs. Public tours of the facility began in December 1995 and remain one of the most popular activities at the resort today. Hundreds of thousands of people have gone on guided tours, and even more have seen programs on dozens of cable channels and network programs. The History Channel has produced multiple stories over the years. Although the Cold War slowly fades from memory, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, made the American public much more conscious of emergency planning. By the time of that catastrophic event, the relationship between the government and The Greenbrier had been over for six years. Despite speculation to the contrary, there never was any attempt to utilize the bunker. It was no longer a viable option because it was no longer maintained at a state of operational readiness since the contractual relationship had ended.

The facility remains today as tangible evidence of the fear that was always not far below the surface of daily life during the Cold War and the realization that only extraordinary means would ensure survival. As dire as those circumstances might have been, The Greenbrier stood prepared to come to the nation’s aid in service to the government’s leadership at a time of utmost crisis.

BOB CONTE is a native of San Jose, California, and a graduate of Santa Clara University. He holds a Ph.D. in American studies from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. Dr. Conte worked at the Western Reserve Historical Society and at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., before becoming the historian at The Greenbrier in 1978. Dr. Conte has written numerous articles, contributed to books and museum exhibits, and is the author of The History of The Greenbrier: America’s Resort. This is his first contribution to GOLDFENSEAL.

The facility remains today as tangible evidence of the fear that was always not far below the surface of daily life during the Cold War and the realization that only extraordinary means would ensure survival.