

Fort Savannah Inn

1966 - 1982: Rosalie Detch

Introduction: In the early 1960s, around a hundred local citizens under the leadership of Dr. John Montgomery had the vision that tourism would be a major contributor to Lewisburg's economy. They formed the Old Red Mill corporation in 1961 and created 265 shares of stock at \$100 per share with the idea of catering to the interests of tourists. The money was used to develop the Old Red Mill Country Store, but after it burned just before opening, they created the Fort Savannah Village museum and craft center. In February 1966, Dr. Montgomery reported to the stockholders:

"Up to this time the project has been supervised by your officers and other member stockholders. Sufficient money has not been available to expand the merchandising phase of the operation or to advertise the project adequately. Furthermore, no member or members can devote the time required to make the operation successful even if money were available for stocking with adequate merchandising products."

Although no records have been located that describe the thinking of the stockholders or that of Rosalie and John Detch during the period February - May, the following can be speculated:

Many of the original investors lost their enthusiasm for developing the property in a way that would cater to the interests of tourists. At the same time, the entrepreneur Rosalie Detch, was thinking of how the property could serve the needs of tourists by adding a full service inn and restaurant to the existing museum and gift shop.

This culminated in an offer to purchase all outstanding shares of the Old Red Mill corporation for \$26,500 and assuming the debt of \$5,000

May 20, 1966 *From the Old Red Mill (ORM) meeting minutes by John Montgomery, President*

"The first matter of business was to determine how many stockholders had indicated their willingness to sell their stock to Mr. John L. Detch at \$100.00 per share in accordance with his written offer made by letter dated May 4, 1966. The canvass revealed that the owners of 226 shares of the 265 issued and outstanding, had expressed their willingness to sell their stock. It was the feeling of the /board of Directors that the few remaining stockholders would be willing to follow the decision of those who had already signified their willingness to sell.

"Considering the overwhelming affirmative response to the stockholders to accept Mr. John L. Detch's offer to purchase their stock at \$100.00 per share it was agreed to expedite the matter in the following matter: . . ."

July 28, 1966 *(ORM meeting minutes by John Montgomery, President)*

". . . the present Board of Directors of the Old Red Mill, Inc. do hereby as a body and individually resign and do thereby divest themselves of any and all responsibility and obligation for said corporation . . ."

August 6, 1966 *(ORM meeting minutes)*

This was the first meeting of the new Directors following the Detch's purchase of the outstanding stock. The Corporation issued new certificates of stock to the Detch family members: John Jr., Charlotte, Paul, Ethel, Rosalie, and John Sr.; Corporate By-laws were adopted; the five Detch family members were elected to be Directors.

August 6, 1966 *(ORM meeting minutes)*

A second Stockholders meeting was held at 11:00 PM that night at which corporate officers were unanimously elected: President – Rosalie Detch, V. President--Charlotte Detch; Secretary and Treasurer – John Detch. John Detch then stated ". . . the present purpose of the management was to prepare the grounds and buildings for suitable use as a restaurant and place of exhibits of matter that may be of interest to tourists . . ."

December 22, 1966 (*ORM meeting minutes*)

This was a very consequential meeting in that three significant reports and actions were taken to buy the land needed for the motel building and adding a kitchen in order to have a full service inn and restaurant.

Kitchen Addition

In July 1966, Rosalie Detch informed the Board of Directors that “the corporation had insufficient funds with which to undertake the construction and improvement of the Old Red Mill property . . . it was agreed that they (Rosalie and John Detch) would furnish materials, labor, and advance the necessary costs for the proper construction of an addition to the Old Red Mill property . . . She (Rosalie Detch) thereupon submitted a statement prepared by Elwood Greene showing the costs of construction of the addition to the building of the Old Red Mill to be in the sum of \$14,354.60 . . . “

Land Acquisition

“It was agreed that the said John L. and Rosalie S. Detch would acquire the house and lot of the Greenbrier Military School (Deed 233-634) which lies on Lafayette St, the Alma Wickline lot (Deed 234-172) which lies north of the Old Red Mill lot, and the Carol Gene Wickline lot (deed 235-454) which lies to the east of the property and on Lafayette St.”

Inn

“. . . it was agreed that the building would be altered, repaired and made suitable for the operation of a restaurant to be known as Fort Savannah Inn . . . “

Paul Detch, son of John and Rosalie Detch, shared his memories of the construction of the kitchen addition to the log building with Cliff Baker in 2023.

Logs for the kitchen addition came from the Oliver house that was between Friars Hill and Williamsburg. Elmer Zimmerman had removed the flooring from the house (it was not used at Fort Savannah) so only the log walls remained. The logs had to be dropped off the side of the building and since Paul had learned about rock climbing and how to belay, it was his job to get them down safely. Fink, a laborer on the job, also helped with a rope and while Paul was belaying a log, Fink's watch got loose so he grabbed for the watch and dropped his rope. Paul was barely able to get the log down without anyone getting hurt. Elmer Zimmerman had set up a large tripod that was used to lift the logs into position to form the walls of the kitchen.

The Oliver house had a large chimney with a fireplace on the outside where the kitchen once had been located. Rosalie Detch was impressed by the design and eventually had a similar chimney and fireplace built as part of the Barracks restoration (another building on the property). The Oliver chimney was not salvaged.' When a building at Sweet Springs was being taken down, she was given one day to salvage bricks. Paul was home from college and was part of the work crew the cleaned and carried the bricks from the work site to the truck. Fink was also on the crew. After an exhausting day's work, they stopped at the Eagles Nest and were treated to a steak dinner as a reward for their hard work. Fink said that was the first time in his life (he was well over 30 then) that he had ever had a steak. That made Paul realize that not everyone had the same opportunities that he had had.

December 30, 1967 (*ORM meeting minutes*)

“Thereupon John L. Detch as Secretary and Treasurer of the corporation informed the meeting that satisfactory progress is being made in the buying of materials for, and the construction of, the 21-unit motel, and in accordance with the plans prepared by Mrs. Ruth Lipps, architect.”

January 3, 1968 (*ORM meeting minutes - Statement of Financial Condition*)

“Note: The corporation is now in the process of constructing the 21-room motel building: the footers are in and the cinder blocks laid to the top of the the first or lower floor. No accurate estimate can now be made of its worth or the costs incurred to this time on the new construction.”



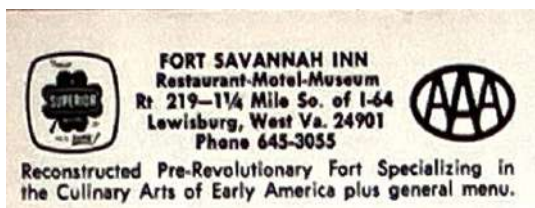
FORT SAVANNAH INN MOTEL
 Hi-Way 219 North
 Lewisburg, W. Va. 24901
 A 21 Unit Motel Located in the Beautiful Greenbrier Valley. Air Conditioned - Cable T.V. - Direct-Dial Phones - Restaurant and Museum Open Year Round.

Postcard of the 1968 21-room motel building and description



Fort Savannah Inn ~1970

and Restaurant



This postcard shows the Fort Savannah Inn as it was first developed and described in the late 1960s and 70s. The logo shows that the Inn was affiliated with the Superior Courts referral chain and met the chain's quality standards. The chain operated from the early 1950s until 1979 when the last renewal membership was made.

Affiliation with AAA continued throughout the years when Rosalie Detch operated the Inn.

June 1977: *Additional motel rooms are needed.*

In 1977 the decision was made to expand the motel so additional rooms would be available to rent during the State Fair. There was not enough time to build a new unit on site so prefabricated units were used to assemble a new motel unit.



The concrete foundation and piers are ready for the first unit to be set in place. The stockade fence in the left photo borders Lafayette St. and in the right photo, the porch of the Moore house, which was purchased in 1966, is visible on the far right behind the construction site.



The top right photo shows the fourth ground floor unit being lowered into place and the lower right photo shows the first second floor unit being swung into place. The second floor units had overhangs on each end to protect the deck that went around the building to access the rooms on the second floor. The photo above left shows the construction details of the floor and the roof.

The "Brief History" states that 40 rooms were added, but the photos above show only 20 being installed with no sign of additional site preparation. It must be that after the 1977 State Fair, 20 additional units were added. However, no information has been found indicating whether those units were also prefabricated or stick-built on site.



1979 Postcard showing the log building and restaurant

FORT SAVANNAH INN
 204 N. Jefferson St.
 Lewisburg, W.V.A. 24901
 Phone: (304) 645-3055

60 Units. 1/4 Mi. S. of I-64 on 219 Downtown.
 Next to Chamber of Commerce Museum, opposite
 Centennial Park, Old Stone Church 3 blocks.
 Lost World Caverns 2 miles, Snowshoe 55 miles.
 Color TV, Air conditioned. Higher rates during
 Special events. Lower Winter Rates. All Major
 Credit Cards Accepted.
 Mrs. Detch — Manager

This postcard was from the 1979 period because the "Brief History" stated that 8 more rooms were added in 1981 bringing the total to 67, while this postcard indicates there were only 60 units. The picture of the dining room tables with white tablecloths suggests that the restaurant offered fine dining rather than the "culinary arts of early America" described on the 1970 postcard. Superior Court affiliations ended in 1979.

When the Superior Court referral chain ended in 1979, the Fort Savannah Inn became affiliated with the Budget Host lodging chain that was founded in 1975. The "Brief History" reports that in 1981, the gross revenue for the Inn was approximately one million dollars and was appraised at \$1.8 million. The next year, the Inn was sold to Savannah Associates.

July 9, 1982 Deed 350-115 *The Old Red Mill, Inc. conveys its property to Savannah Associates for \$1,245,000:*

" . . . all of that certain tract or parcel of real estate, together with the buildings and improvements located thereon and the easements and appurtenances thereunto belonging . . . The aforesaid real estate is the same as that conveyed . . . by John L. Detch and wife, and by Rosalie S. Detch and others, by deeds 236-385 dated December 29, 1966 (the GMS and Wickline lots), and 214-16 dated August 1, 1961 (the original Blue Grass Mill lot). . .

"Declaration of consideration of value: Under penalties of fine and imprisonment as provided by law, I hereby declare the total consideration paid for the property conveyed by the document to which this declaration is appended is \$1,245,000.00. "

It is interesting to note that the Old Red Mill corporation continued as a business, even though it had no assets, for several years.

1982 - 1987: Savannah Associates

The "Brief History" says that during the next 2 years, a beautiful lounge was added and 23 rooms were refurbished. The lounge would have been in the basement of the log building and operated until the early 2000s. During the first full year of operation by Savannah Associates, the motel, restaurant, lounge, and gift shop grossed approximately \$1.3 million. Gross receipts consistently declined and it became impossible to pay the 11% interest on the note of \$1.2 million (\$3.1 million in today's dollars). The interest payment would have been around \$28,000 per month in today's dollars. Needless to say, that was not sustainable and bankruptcy was declared in 1986. Rosalie Detch bought the property at auction in January 1987 for a half million dollars.

January 30, 1987 Deed 380-24 *The Old Red Mill, Inc. purchases the property at the Courthouse auction for \$500,000.00.*

"That, whereas, the said George S. Leslie, Trustee,. . . did personally sell the real estate hereinafter described and conveyed at public auction at the front door of the Courthouse on the 30th day of January, 1987 at 11:30 a.m. . . . at which sale the said Old Red Mill, Inc, . . . became the purchaser for the sum of five hundred thousand and 00/100 dollars . . . "

1987 - 1999: Rosalie Detch

Shortly after the Old Red Mill, Inc had purchased the Inn at auction, Rosalie Detch made several upgrades as shown on this postcard from the late 1980s.



The postcard features the lounge that the Savannah Associates added around 1983. The hot tub and heated pool that were probably built shortly after the Inn was bought at auction. Technology was also featured: rooms included cable TV and touch-tone phones.

The "Brief History of the fort Savannah Inn Property" was written around 1989 when attempts were made to sell the Inn. After the property was purchased at the end of January 1987, the motel opened in February, the restaurant in April, and the lounge in July. During the first 11 months of 1988, revenue was \$311,000 for the motel, \$186,000 for the restaurant, \$61,000 for the lounge, and \$3,000 for the gift shop. This was about 40% below the the 1981 revenue when the Inn was sold in 1981. The "History" explains:

"This is a largely seasonal area, with very little tourist traffic in the four winter months. Some ski resort business comes our way, but we are about one and a half hours from the slopes. Parties add to the restaurant business in the winter months, even though tourists are down.

The impact of the completion of the interstate (in 1988) has not yet been determined.

Aggressive management of the motel should be able to increase revenues.

Asking price is \$1.3 million, preferred terms are cash or trade. The property is described as almost 2 acres on Jefferson Street, Lewisburg in the historic district. 67 rooms, restaurant, lounge, 2 meeting rooms, laundry, 1 small dwelling house."

The sales effort was not successful and Rosalie Detch ran the Fort Savannah Inn for a period of 12 years. Eventually, she sold the Inn in 1999 for \$835,000.

December 27, 1999 Deed 459-873 *The Old Red Mill, Inc sold the Fort Savannah Inn property to Chandan, LLC for \$835,000 by Rosalie Detch, President* Once again, The Old Red Mill, Inc. had no assets.

1999 - 2013: Chandan LLC

Since Chandan is an LLC with no local ties, there is no direct information about how the Fort Savannah operated. However, there are urban legends, recollections by individuals, and customer reviews that reflect how the business declined over the years. The lounge in the basement of the log building was a popular place to hang out and socialize. One favorite event was the monthly birthday party - all the people with a birthday that month would come and celebrate as a group.

Over the years, the quality of the rooms and service declined as indicated by these reviews:

Trip Advisor 10/13/2006 "I wish we had read the entire Trip Advisor site on Lewisburg - we'd have avoided the Econo Lodge at all costs! All the negative reviews are still accurate. . . . This was the filthiest room we have ever stayed in . . . Management could have cared less. Choice Hotels should be ashamed of this franchise. "

YELP 11/30/2011 "HORRIBLE place. Cheap price means you get what you paid for!! This place should be shut-down. . . . We travel often and this place, was by far, the WORST experience EVER. The only reason we stayed was because we were too tired to go any further and the price was cheap. SO, cheap price = CHEAP amenities, but some things are inexcusable! Whoever regulates the hotel/motel industry in that area should close them down. "

Theresa's Haunted History of the Tri-State 9/4/2012 ". . . When doing research for this location, I came across scores of reviews from guests to the hotel...and not one of them was positive. The main issues were filthy rooms, broken bathroom fixtures, and an extremely rude staff with a manager who price gouged room rates whenever area events made rooms in town scarce. The hotel was put up for sale in 2010, but apparently is still operational as of July 2012, with little to no marked improvement, and rumors that one building housing motel rooms is actually shut down because its sinking into an underground cavern."

At some point, the fort Savannah Inn lost its affiliation with Budget Host but kept the sign in place for a period of time. Legend has it that Budget Host eventually demanded that the sign be removed. One of the motel buildings was condemned and Chandan went into bankruptcy and the property was again sold at auction.

June 27, 2013: Deed 558-169 The Fort Savannah Inn property is sold by U.S. Bank to Appalachian Mountain Advocates for \$435,000 [and later transferred to the Greenbrier Valley restoration Project October 15, 2014, deed 569-236]

"Grantee acknowledges that . . . the property is conveyed "as is" and "with all faults". . . Grantee acknowledges and accepts that Grantor has disclaimed. . . (i) the value, condition, merchantability, habitability, marketability, profitability, suitability or fitness for a particular use or purpose of the property, (ii) the manner or quality of the construction or materials, if any, incorporated into the

construction, of any improvements to the property, and (iii) the manner of repair, quality of repair, state of repair or lack of repair of any such improvements."

Epilogue

Shortly after purchasing the property, Appalachian Mountain Advocates made plans to tear down the two motel buildings, renovate the log building, and open a new restaurant. Since demolishing the rundown motel buildings would remove the eyesore from the entrance to downtown Lewisburg, the City helped pay for the demolition. Renovation of the log building involved replacing the roof structure, replacing the electrical and plumbing systems, and installing modern HVAC, sprinkler, and fire alarm systems. The next year, the property was transferred to the Greenbrier Valley Restoration Project, a 501(c)(3) organization, by deed 569-236.

WV Secretary of State

The Secretary of State maintains a database of corporations registered in WV and there are several interesting entries related to Montwell Commons.

The Old Red Mill: Registered on 6/19/1961 by John Montgomery and Andrew McLaughlin and revoked on 6/15/2001 for Failure to File Annual Report.

Old Fort, Inc: Registered on 1/29/1987 by Rosalie Detch and terminated on 7/26/2005 as a Voluntary Dissolution. The tradenames Budget Host Fort Savannah Inn and Village Motel were registered on 3/13/1989. It is interesting that the corporation was not dissolved until 6 years after the Inn was sold to Chandan and 4 years after the Old Red Mill was terminated.

Old Fort Restaurant and Bar Association: Registered on 3/31/2000 (3 months after the Inn was sold to Chandan) and revoked on 12/1/2008 for Failure to File Annual Report. It was incorporated by Lisa Lackey with the principle address 204 N. Jefferson Street, the original address of the fort Savannah Inn. No other information about the corporation has been found, but it may have been formed to operate the restaurant and lounge at the Ft. Savannah Inn.

References

Ethel Detch Rogers provided a "Brief History of the Fort Savannah Inn" that was probably written by Rosalie Detch around 1987 as part of a sales prospectus.

The Old Red Mill stockholder meeting minutes are located in the Greenbrier Historical Society archives.