

## **Capon Springs: A Time Capsule of History and Memories Sits Hidden in the Mountains of West Virginia**

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*Almost heaven, West Virginia.*

John Denver's smooth, warm voice plays over the car speaker as a cloud of dust follows behind the vehicle down the windy dirt road.

The anticipation for the final destination of the ride increases with every corner turned. Frequent visitors often try to guess which bend ends their journey, but it seems that only those who have been around for 30 plus years have a fair shot at a perfect prediction.

Sun shines through the tall oak trees that designate the path up and down the mountain and eventually deeper into a valley. A small rectangular slab of wood acts as a makeshift sign vaguely marking the halfway point: "Duck Run Road."

A Google Maps search would fail to detect the location of those passing through, especially with the lack of internet connection that increases as the surrounding forest thickens.

As one car goes further into the valley, another might approach in the other direction. This is a symbolic interaction between drivers – a hint and reminder of the magic that the incoming group is about to experience for the next week.

Suddenly, the trees disappear. The road becomes paved, and a clearing unveils an idyllic vista.

A throwback to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, old white columned buildings - no more than three stories tall - stand on either side of the road. There is an immediate sense that people have been in this place for a long time.

Green is everywhere. It's in the detailing on the scaffolding and shudders of the buildings, the railings of every grand porch, and the fountain that stands in the middle of what could be described as a private college campus. Large lawns cover the area and well-kept gardens seem to breathe as they complete the scene.

Classical music sings from the trees, a sign that the next meal is about to start. However, people move at a leisurely pace.

Some sit in large rocking chairs as they catch up with longtime friends they haven't seen in a while. Children play in the frigid pool and screech with laughter as their toes touch the water. Couples are snuggled up in hammocks admiring each other face to face as gravity smooshes their bodies together.

They have all made it to Capon Springs and Farms for their annual visit. Situated at the eastern edge of West Virginia is the serene sanctuary that has stood the test of time.

A constant flow of spring water acts as white noise at all hours of the day – a reminder of the relaxation this place and its history demands of every person who steps foot on the 320 acres of intimate land.

### **Dirty Dancing (kind of)**

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Capon Springs has a distinct physical appearance; the notion of it is much harder to grasp.

However, one common analogy is used when annual visitors of Capon are asked about their family mountain getaway:

“When asked I usually start with ‘Capon is this beautiful resort in West Virginia,’” said Caroline Ervin (56), ‘Third Week in August’ Capon-goer since 1991. “Then I say, ‘It’s like the movie Dirty Dancing but without the dancing and without the fancy dress.’”



The Main House

The Third Week in August is one of Capon’s most packed weeks of the summer season. The same families return year after year, for the same week. Newcomers of the third week – usually those married into long-time Capon families – often liken it to a club or cult, but a good one.

Ervin remembers her first visit to Capon Springs. At the time, she had been dating her now husband, Jimmy, for five years.

“Bringing someone to Capon is very important and says something about the relationship,” Charlotte Masters (25), Capon-for-lifer, said. “It is intimidating but in the least intimidating way possible. It’s like getting approval from your extended family.”

Ervin drove to Capon from Washington, D.C., on the Thursday of the third week in August. She remembers stepping out of the car and being peppered with questions from people she didn’t know – but they knew exactly who she was.

Jimmy’s friends of 20 plus years welcomed Ervin with open arms.

“At first I thought Capon was very exclusive,” she said. “But I’ve come to find that isn’t the case at all. There is, however, a ‘Capon way’ so you have to be a special person to appreciate what that means.”

### **The “Capon Way”**

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When guests start to arrive on Sunday for their week-long visit, they often take the day to re-acclimate themselves. But this process is short lived.

“When you first get to Capon, you have to kind of readjust, but it feels completely natural to me having grown up there,” Masters said.

Master’s grandparents started coming to Capon in 1952 when they heard about it through a friend. They have been coming ever since.

She often jokes that she has only known her Capon friends for 25 weeks of her life, only seeing them once every year.

Similarly, Masters knows what she will be eating every day during the Third Week in August for the rest of her life:

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Breakfast	Bacon, eggs, and toast	Buckwheat pancakes	French toast	Sausage, eggs, toast	Coffee cake	Variety hot cereal	Bacon, eggs, and toast
Lunch	Cold cuts	Tacos	Sloppy Joes "on the hill"	Chicken Pot Pie	Spaghetti	Sliders	Zucchini Casserole
Dinner	Chicken a-la king	Chicken "on the hill"	Meatloaf	Shrimp casserole	Steak "on the hill"	Pork and fish	Thanksgiving

For newcomers, the adjustment is greater. However, as the week goes on, people begin to gain their footing.

"Usually, people need some sort of orientation," Jonathan Bellingham, third generation member of the family-owned business and now Director of Guest Relations, said. "It's hard to put into words how to be prepared for what the Capon experience really is."



Monday Breakfast

Every morning at 8:25, people gather outside of the Main House for flag raising. The recorded rendition of the National Anthem that plays changes day to day. The high-pitched operatic soprano version is a crowd favorite and often leads to the occasional "church giggle" amongst the younger generations.

Breakfast, lunch, and dinner are served family style and are marked by a loud bell that rings before every meal. Being late to breakfast is a sign that someone was up past curfew (11 pm) the night before drinking on the golf course – coined "the hill" – or tending to a whiney newborn clocking in for their first Capon visit.



Capon Room

The rooms are rustic and simple, including only the necessities: a sink, twin or double beds that slant horizontally when you lay on them, two pendant lights with old-fashioned shades, a bulky wooden dresser, and a warped mirror hanging on the wall.

There is no AC, locks on the doors, or Wi-Fi, except in the Meeting House, for customers whose work occasionally calls even on vacation.

"We've had to take some liberties with things like Wi-Fi," Bellingham said. "But other than that, the foundation of Capon is still the same. Our brand is unplug and be in community."

## Healing Powers

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The history of Capon Springs dates back thousands of years ago when it was simply a place of pilgrimage. In the 1760s, European settlers were just discovering the area and found the Capon spring that still constantly flows today.

“If there’s one thread line that goes through the entire history of Capon it’s the water,” Bellingham said.

In the 1850s, Capon Springs was put on the map as a resort. Current standing president at the time, Franklin Pierce, even stayed at Capon in 1853. By the early 1900s, Capon along with many other spring resorts went out of business.

In 1911, Capon’s main structure burned down, destroying any evidence of what used to stand in the mountain nook, except the spring that started it all.

The water became the main lead, Bellingham said, which is when his grandparents Lou and Virginia Austin came into the picture.



Painting of Capon, 1900s

The Austin’s gained the rights to bottle and distribute it. At the time, Capon Springs water had been a prescribed medicine by many doctors due to its “healing powers.”

Around the time Lou and Virginia joined the business, the FDA got involved and stopped the distribution of the water. The Austin’s bought the land and rebuilt the resort. In 1932, Capon Springs and Farms reopened as a family-owned bed and breakfast.

At first, it was a small operation, invitation only. Slowly but surely, friends and family continued to invite others leading to what Capon is today.

“If you were trying to duplicate what Capon is somewhere else, I’m not sure how you would do that,” Bellingham said. “The traditions and family-oriented style of Capon is not something you can put in a bottle and franchise.”

## A Day in the Life

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While some prefer a more relaxed schedule, others, like Masters, pack their days full.

“I start every day with a dip in the 60-degree spring fed pool at 7:30,” Masters said. “It is better than a cup of coffee, and I stand by that.”

Day to day activities change for each family and Capon-er who hold their own rituals. Activities range from golf and shuffleboard tournaments held throughout the week, cards and board games, eating, chatting, hammock sitting, massages and soaks at the spa, or a hike on one of the various trails connected to the main campus – just to name a few.



Capon Spring Fed Pool

Ervin's Capon schedule has changed over the years, but porch sitting and gossiping with "the girls" before and after meals has always been one of Ervin's favorite activities. That and crashing the private banjo concert her neighbor, Marshall, puts on for anyone to listen on the third-floor porch of the Main House.

"Marshall always asks if his banjo playing is bothering me," Ervin said. "And every time, I have to reassure him that it is more than ok for him to play his banjo on the porch."

Ann Permar (82) has been a Third Week in August attendee since 1949. Her Capon agenda has remained nearly untouched for 74 years.

"At my age, haven't ever missed a year of Capon since I was seven, things start to blur together," Permar said with a laugh. "When you live it so long, it's hard to recognize the changes."

Morning and afternoon, Permar heads straight to the golf course after meals, much like her father used to do. At 5 o'clock Permar is designated "porch party" host, setting out goldfish and peanuts for close friends and family and filling up coolers with ice for the perfect pre-dinner beverage.

Permar's husband, David, was easy to acclimate to Capon, always appreciating its routine as a military veteran and "rough it out" kind of guy. Before passing away in 2022, he always loved entertaining his grandchildren during the slower hours of the day and could often be seen shedding a tear when they performed for the Thursday night talent show.



"The Hill"

In addition to the talent show, evening programming includes a hayride, campfire with songs and hotdogs, as well as the Starlight Dance. "Too cool" teenage boys and soft-hearted grandpas alike show up for the events to support the younger generations who are carrying on the legacy.

"Some people view Capon as a spiritual experience," Bellingham said. "Others just feel it on an emotional level. There's this positive peer pressure that allows them to be the best of themselves no matter their age or walk of life."

## Family Bonds

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While there are a number of people who deeply care for Capon, Bellingham has concerns for the future of the carefully crafted business his family has put 92 years of hard work into, the past 40 years for

Bellingham himself.



Birds Eye View of Capon

There is a constant threat of larger companies buying up the land that Capon proudly sits on.

Despite concerns for the future, Bellingham is proud of the mutual trust that has formed amongst him and his extended family. Even



more so, he strongly believes that the success of Capon can be attributed to the connections amongst guests, staff, and managers.

“It is so great to see younger people who came here as a child and connect with that,” Bellingham said. “It becomes so embedded in their early experiences that once they have kids, they want to bring them here too.”

Masters is the youngest member of the Guest Council, which started in 2020. The goal of the council is to bring guests’ concerns to the surface and, more broadly, keep Capon alive.

Some of the committees’ goals include holding onto tradition like bringing back afternoon tea at the pool, a suggestion from long-time Capon-goers that provides a sense of nostalgia.

However, changes are also pertinent to the objective of keeping Capon afloat. An increase in marketing as well as the addition of new activities, such as fling golf and pickle ball, are just a few of the tweaks that have helped to further enhance the Capon experience.

“I just want my kids to have the opportunity to explore Capon as an option for their potential life career,” Bellingham said. “I don’t want them to have to worry about the physical space still being here.”

Permar has seen the labor of love the Austin family has carried throughout the years. Bellingham is a testament to this, Permar said, having known him since he was born.

In 2004, after harsh judgment from guests and management, the Capon Hygeia Spa was built. Bellingham fought hard for the addition, and it is now one of Capon’s greatest draws and attractions.



Hygeia Spa

“Jonathan really vouched for the Spa and everyone thought he was crazy to be quite honest,” Permar said. “I’m glad to see how Capon has grown in this way and could grow in the future beyond what it is today, while still being a place that is able to reconnect with people’s pasts.”

## Shock to the System

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As the years have gone by, the friendships formed at Capon have slowly seeped into everyday lives. Ervin gets together with the “Capon Queens,” also known as the porch gossipers, once a month in Washington, D.C. Two of her kids now live with friends from Capon, and her husband regularly golfs with fellow Caponers, desperate to work on their game before August rolls around.

These interactions wouldn’t be possible without the community Capon has cultivated.



Main House Porch

“It is an extension of a lovely friendship of people you’ve known for a really long time,” Ervin said. “They know your ups and downs, and they know what happens in your regular life but aren’t worried about the day-to-day, mundane things.”

Masters uses Capon as a system to keep track of life landmarks. Being at Capon during the Third Week in August once a year is like a reset she said, like New Year's Day.

As Bellingham puts it, Capon is a "shock to the system." Like Master's morning dip in the pool, Permar's long-distance swing on the golf course, or Marshall's first pick of his banjo on the Main House porch.

Capon is the place where you have your first kiss on the pebbled playground in between a game of hide and seek. The place where you console crying newborns in rocking chairs until a friendly face and once young parent comes to take over to provide some support. The place that never changes even as you grow old with your partner. And the place where you scatter the ashes of a loved one lost.

"It is a constant in our lives," Ervin said. "Capon doesn't change. As fast as the world changes, as busy as we get, as things around us kind of swirl and sometimes feel like they get out of control, you know that for that one week everything is predictable and okay."

### **Country Roads**

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Another successful week has passed too quickly at Capon Springs. The car is packed, hugs are shared, and the annual "kids picture" has been taken on the front porch.

The kids picture will be looked back on in saved albums and hauled to Capon the next August by the designated Third Week historian.

The same black tubes sit in the pool; the rickety aluminum chairs on the hill continue to rust with every rain that passes. These albums document the changes of Capon or lack thereof. But every guest that visits will never forget the sights and scents of Capon Springs.

Passengers hop in the car and find that John Denver's 'Country Roads' is paused in the same spot it was on Sunday – Capon's unplug motto has worked once again.

Driving up the paved road the white buildings with green accents slowly disappear as glances in the rearview mirror are shared, trying to catch one last glimpse until next August.

Pavement turns to dirt and the uphill, bumpy drive begins. Another car passes by. Looks and waves are exchanged between drivers, marking the end for one and the beginning for another.

Almost heaven will be patiently waiting until next summer.