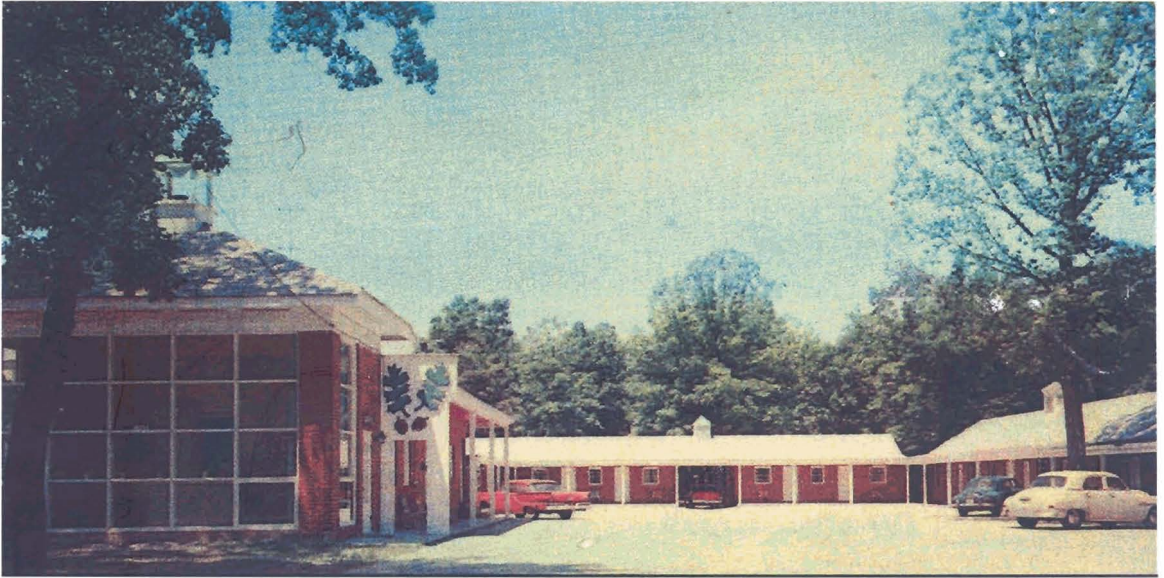


A Brief Context for Motels and Motor Courts Route 1, Central Virginia



ROUTE No. 1 — 12 MILES SOUTH OF RICHMOND — 9 MILES NORTH OF PETERSBURG



John E. Wells
Virginia Department of Transportation – Richmond District
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Over one hundred resources categorized as motels or motor courts are recorded in the VDHR Data Sharing System. This context study examines motels and motor courts across the Commonwealth, focusing on those along Route 1 in Hanover, Henrico, and Chesterfield counties, to assist in applying the National Register criteria of evaluation to such resources. Surveys by Jeff O'Dell in Chesterfield County and by Ashley Neville in Hanover County help establish a historic context for the tourist camps and motels that developed on Route 1 during the early and middle 20th century. U.S. Route 1, combining sections of older roads with new construction, was inaugurated in 1927, and most of the tourist camps and motels in central Virginia were located on this road.

O'Dell, in *Chesterfield County: Early Architecture and Historic Sites* (1983), pp. 450-453, outlines the evolution of motels, beginning with auto-camping (also called gypsying), popular in the 1910s, and the primitive auto-camps that provided space for motorists to park their cars and pitch a tent (and, later, to park a trailer). Some camps provided public toilets, showers, and cooking facilities. Auto-camps were much less expensive than hotels, and in their primitive nature and rural locations, they appealed to a sense of spontaneous adventure, and of testing one's self-reliance in a non-urban environment.¹

Many early tourist camps were started by a farmer or country storekeeper who happened to own land along a major route of transportation. Like country taverns, auto-camps offered simple, cheap, semi-communal accommodations, and catered to all classes of people, from "tin-can tourists" (Depression migrants) to the owners of Packards and Cadillacs.

Auto-camping took new dimensions with the development of the camping trailer and the house trailer. There are many trailer parks on Route 1, some of them still identified as campgrounds (or, all too often, as "Kampgrounds." Any of these parks might have been started as an auto camp. The RoadRunner Campground in Chesterfield County is an example.

A more elaborate alternative, the cabin camp or motor court, emerged in the 1920s. Cabin camps had permanent buildings, sometimes one room, sometimes two; and sometimes with private bathrooms or cooking facilities. The cabins were typically tiny; at Parnell's, in Chesterfield County, the one-room cottages measured 12'-3" by 10'-3". A feature of most cabin camps was the owner's house; several of the surveyed cabin camps (and some of the early motels) include an old house on the property, which usually was the residence of the camp

¹ O'Dell cites Warren J. Belasco, *Americans on the Road: From Autocamp to Motel, 1910-1945* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1979) as his primary source on motel evolution.

operator. Examples include the Up Away Cabin Camp, the Colbrook Motel (both in Chesterfield), and the Hobbs property (046-5101) in Isle of Wight County.



Figure 1: Up Away Cabin Camp, Chesterfield County

While still much less expensive than hotels, the cabins represented an upgraded balance, “the public’s willingness to trade a certain degree of independence and economy for greater comfort, security, and convenience.” O’Dell described the evolution of the cabins from rudimentary frame shacks to substantial brick buildings. A cabin camp might have only two or three cabins, but larger ones like Moore’s Brick Cottages had more than a dozen. The Hobbs property (046-5101) has three frame tourist cabins, which were never fitted with plumbing or electricity.



Figure 2: Typical cabin, Moore's Brick Cottages, Chesterfield County

Sometimes cabin camps were associated with automobile service stations. In Rockingham County, the Pure Village Cottages (082-0311), one of a cluster of three early tourist courts on the Valley Turnpike, were built in 1936 in association with the Pure Oil Company; the adjacent Valley Lee Cottages were built for Shell Oil Co. and the Green Lantern Cottages for Gulf.

Some cabin camps had associated restaurants. The Dutch Garden Motel in Albemarle County (002-2185) included a restaurant, and Moore's Brick Cottages (020-0671) included a finely detailed restaurant. A ca. 1940 postcard for Moore's Brick Cottages advertised "Brick Cottages with or without Bath – Garage – Steam Heat – Shady Grove – Bathing – Modern Air Conditioned Restaurant." The well-known "South of the Border" complex in Latta, South Carolina, has associated resources carried to extreme levels – motels, campgrounds, RV parks, swimming pools, restaurants, gift shops, service stations, fireworks stands, miniature golf, promotional billboards, and more, all grouped under a peculiar cartoon-Mexican theme.



Figure 3: Restaurant, Moore's Brick Cottages, Chesterfield County

Cabin camps have been recorded in Albemarle, Augusta, Caroline, Chesterfield, Lee, Page, Prince George, Rockbridge, Rockingham, Stafford, and other counties. Other names for these places were auto court, cottage court, hotel court, tour-o-tel, auto hotel, bungalow court, cabin court, motor court, tourist court, and trav-o-tel. The Motel Inn in San Luis Obispo, California, built in 1925, was designed by Pasadena architect Arthur Heineman, who is credited with creating the term "motel." A most interesting cabin camp/auto court, "Victor's Hollywood Auto Court" in Stafford County (089-0138), with 17 contributing buildings, has been recommended eligible for listing in the National Register. The DSS intensive survey form by Helen Ross of VDOT (1997), referencing Jackle's *The Motel in America*, provides this analysis:

The history of Victor's is quite fascinating and exemplifies the culturally conservative origins of the motel trade in the 1930s. Motels offered an economic opportunity in the classic sense of frontier property manipulated for financial gain. It was comparatively easy to start a motel. Knowledge was not yet specialized enough to deter the merely willing. Little capital was required. In many cases the land was farm acreage no longer profitable because of depressed agricultural prices or rendered otherwise useless along a recently laid highway. Construction seemed easy. Builders' magazines beckoned with unsubstantiated claims of low costs while facilitating cabin construction with plans giving specific dimensions and materials. Motels indeed were born and flourished because of the Depression, not despite it.

The motor court of the 1930s and 40s gave way after World War II to the motor hotel or motel; a unified, linear block of joined guest rooms, generally arranged in courtyard fashion, and often with a swimming pool. The motels typically provided larger rooms than did the cabin camps – yielding, again, to market demand, and reducing, again, the difference from the traditional hotel. O’Dell identified the Snow White, the White House, and the Par Three Motel in Chesterfield County as relatively unaltered examples. The Motel (003-5039) built in 1945 in Alleghany County, was found eligible under Criteria A and C, evidently as an early example.



Figure 4: White House Motel, Chesterfield County

O’Dell found that most of the Chesterfield motels were cheaply built, with little architectural quality; and that many sought to convey – cheaply -- a familiar architectural image, especially the Colonial, to tourists. “Small gabled porches, two-story porticos, undersize cupolas or nonfunctional dormers or shutters” were recorded on many motels. O’Dell cited the Colony Inn as the most substantial “Colonial” design. Moore’s Brick Cottages had fine Art Deco and Art Moderne elements, and peculiar inserts of mortared cobblestone panels within the brickwork. O’Dell described the Town and County Motor Lodge, Albemarle County (002-0363), ca. 1950, as “a true oddity;” the building’s peculiar dome, probably a reference to nearby Monticello, has drawn much attention. In Williamsburg, the Art-Moderne Tioga Motel (137-5004), built in 1940, was determined eligible in 1997.



Figure 5: Colony Inn, Chesterfield County

Road signs, frequently illuminated with neon, were important features of motels, and O'Dell described the "attention-getting imagery" including a silhouette of Robert E. Lee (Robert E. Lee Motel) and a Walt Disney-style Dutch boy in wooden shoes (Dutch Gap Tourist Court). The Dutch Inn in Collinsville (ca. 1970) included an oversized faux windmill with rotating blades. Information for motorists, including room rates, vacancy status, and services available (air conditioning, color TV), were often provided. Names of motels were selected to appeal to different motivations, including cleanliness (Snow White), comfort (Shady Rest), local attractions (Fairystone), food (Black Kettle), scenery (Mountain View), and golf (Par Three).



Figure 6: Snow White Motel, Chesterfield County

National chains, like Holiday Inn and Ramada, began taking over the industry in the 1960s. "As late as 1962, 98 percent of motels were individually owned, so each had its own character."² But, "Holiday Inn. . . went from 79 outlets in 1958 to almost 1,500 in less than twenty years. Today [1999] just five chains account for one-third of all the motel rooms in America." Many early motels are functionally obsolete. Some have been adapted for inexpensive housing.

Motels and Motor Courts in Chesterfield County:

O'Dell surveyed twelve cottage courts and five motels, dating from ca. 1930 to 1960, for the 1976-1978 Chesterfield County architectural survey. Well-preserved cottage groups (at that time) included Parnell Motor Court, Dutch Gap Tourist Court, Bellwood Manor, Lee Court, and Moore's Brick Cottages. Current windshield survey of Route 1 between Richmond and Petersburg identifies many motels and tourist courts, dating from the 1930s through the 1970s, including the following (listed from north to south):

- City Motel, 1970s. Intact.
- Motel Jefferson Davis, 1960s. Intact.
- Rainbow Inn, 1970s. Intact.
- Fort Darling Motel, 1930s. Intact.

² Bryson, "Room Service," pp. 44-45.



Figure 7: Fort Darling Motel, Chesterfield County

- Stratford Inn, 1960s. Intact.
- Chimney Corner Motel, 1920s or 1930s; most elements demolished, 2006.
- 020-0664, Bellwood Manor Motel, ca. 1945. This appears to be the present “Martha Kay Inn.”



Figure 8: Bellwood Manor Motel (Martha Kay Inn), Chesterfield County

- Virginian Motel, 1970s. Intact.
- 020-0665, Snow White Motel, ca. 1950. Intact.
- 020-0666, White House Motel, ca. 1945. Intact.
- 020-0667, Motel, ca. 1940. Not found.
- 020-0668, Colony Inn Motel, ca. 1940. Intact.
- 020-0669, Dutch Gap Tourist Court, ca. 1930. Not found.
- 020-0670, Robert E. Lee Motel, ca. 1950. Not found.
- 020-0671, Moore’s Brick Cottages Motel, also known as Moore’s Lake Tavern and Brick Cottages, ca. 1920-1951. This exceptional complex included a restaurant, an office building, thirty or more brick cabins, and a swimming lake; the buildings had unusual construction, with panels of mortared cobblestone inserted in the brickwork. Most of the

cabins were destroyed in 2005. The restaurant, office building, and at least two cottages are still standing as of July 2006. A large part of the property is a trailer park, and it is possible that Moore's functioned as an auto camp before the cabins were built.

- 020-0683, Patrick Henry Hotel, ca. 1950. A "Budget Inn" is at this approximate location; it might have replaced the Patrick Henry.
- 020-0682, Lee Court Motel, ca. 1930. Not found.
- Fireside Inn, 1930s. Intact.
- Colbrook Motel, ca. 1960. Intact. The buildings have modernistic swept-wing roof planes (like a poor man's – a *very* poor man's – Dulles).



Figure 9: Colbrook Motel, Chesterfield County

- 020-0783, recorded as "Up Away," but no further information in DSS. The cabin court (with one rustic log cabin and several frame cabins) is intact.
- 020-0676, Pine Acres Mortel (sic), ca. 1930. "Note the sign, which for an unknown reason spells 'motel' as 'mortel.'" Destroyed.
- 020-0678, Motor Court (Roy J.'s Restaurant), ca. 1940. Intact.
- 020-0679, Motor Court (Jimmy's Used Cars), ca. 1925 and later.
- 020-0677, Par 3 Motel, ca. 1945. Intact.
- Shamrock Motel, 1930s. Intact.



Figure 10: Shamrock Motel, Chesterfield County

- 020-0680, Motor Court (T. J.'s Corner Shops), ca. 1935. Intact.

Motels and Motor Courts in Colonial Heights:

One un-named motel, probably ca. 1955, survives in Colonial Heights on Route 1, just south of Birch Road. The picturesquely-named Roses of Picardy Motel was noted as recently as 2001, but it appears to have been demolished.

Motels and Motor Courts in Hanover County:

Ashley Neville, in surveys carried out in 1989 and in 2005, identified most of the early motels and tourist courts in Hanover County, including:

- 042-0310, the Wigwam, a “ticky-tacky 1940s tourist court with a faux folk log building”
- 042-0311, the Tourist Court/Garage, “a good example of an early tourist court/motel”
- 042-0315, the Hotel Comfort
- 042-0316, Green Acres
- 042-5219, the Kosmo Village
- 042-5215, the Cadillac Motel
- 042-5218, the Mary’s Old Inn

Neville recommended none of these motels as eligible for listing in the National Register.

The 1961 Ashland town directory (the earliest Ashland directory held by the Library of Virginia) listed four motels: the Shady Grove (Route 1, north), and the College Shop, Palm Leaf, and Twin Oaks (Route 1, south). The College Shop motel has been destroyed; the remaining three have survived to 2006.



Figure 11: Twin Oaks Motel, Ashland

Motels and Motor Courts in Henrico County:

Early motels or cabin courts in Henrico County include the following:

- Lynn-B Motor Court, 7301 Brook Road, ca. 1955. Intact. The Spach Motor Court (Spach Tourist Cabins) was at this location during the 1940s.
- Terrace Tourist Court, 7305 Brook Road, ca. 1950. Intact.
- Colonial Hotel Court (043-0704), built ca. 1940, destroyed in 1993.

Motels and Motor Courts in City of Richmond:

The 1941 Richmond city business directory did not include “motels.” Several “tourists’ camps,” including Camp Richmond, 5220 Brook Road; Hall’s Tourist Camp, 5212 Brook Road; and Royall’s Tourist Camp, Brook Road at Norwood, were listed. Royall’s provided cabins, meals, gas, and automobile repairs for tourists.

In the 1948-1949 directory, “tourist camps” included Brook Run Lodge, Colonial Hotel Court, Richmond Auto Court, and Spach Cabins Tourist Camp, all located on Brook Road. A dozen or more “tourist homes” were also listed; all of these were on Jefferson Davis Highway. The difference between a tourist home and a tourist camp was not described. Perhaps a tourist home was a private residence with rooms made available for tourists. The “Oasis Lodge,” which appears to be such a tourist home, is on Jefferson Davis Highway, north of Mimosa Street.

The first listing for a “motel” in the Richmond business directories was the Richmond Motel, Lombardy Street at Brook Road, listed in 1953. A motel is still at the location; perhaps it includes elements from the ca. 1954 complex. In the 1954 directory, two motels were listed, the Brook Run Lodge, 5221 Brook Road, and the Richmond Auto Court, 7204 Brook Road; each motel had an advertisement with a photograph. These two motels, and no others, were listed in the 1956 directory, also.

By 1957, the business directory listed 16 motels and auto courts. For 1959, the Richmond metropolitan region was divided into two directories, “City” and “Suburban”; and there were 22 motels listed in the 1959 Suburban directory, and 12 more in the City directory. The 1961 Richmond Suburban directory listed 37 motels.

The Town Motel (127-5514), built ca. 1950, was evaluated and found not eligible ca. 1990. The building was destroyed in 1992.

National Register Significance in Motor Courts and Motels

Motor courts and motels, like any other resource, might be considered significant under the National Register Criterion A, for association with historic events (such as the Memphis motel where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot); or Criterion B, for association with significant persons (the Memphis motel, again); or Criterion C, as embodying the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction (for example, the Colony Inn Motel in Chesterfield might be evaluated under Criterion C as a skillful and literate expression of the Colonial Revival style). These applications of the criteria are independent of the resource’s historic function as a motor court/motel – the Memphis motel may be eligible as a resource associated with Dr. King’s

death, or the Colony Inn may be eligible as a building expressing the distinctive characteristics of the Colonial Revival style.

Under what conditions or circumstances might a resource be considered significant as a motor court or motel? This study cannot provide a conclusive answer, but can provide informed suggestions.

Motor courts or motels might be considered significant under Criterion A if they are of relatively early construction (suggested, 1920s for frame cabin courts; 1930s for masonry motor courts; or 1940s for linear-block motels), or if they include many of the affiliated functions (such as gasoline stations, stores, restaurants, or swimming pools). The Motel (003-5039) built in 1945, was evidently determined eligible because of its early date of construction. Victor's Hollywood Auto Court (089-0138) was determined eligible, partly because of its wide range of associated functions. The Hobbs property (046-5101), with the owners' residence, general store, and three frame cabins, was determined eligible in 2005. Moore's Brick Cottages Motel (020-0671) should be evaluated under Criterion A, considering its wide range of associated functions. Other Route 1 motels that may justify evaluation under Criterion A include the Richmond Motel, and resource 042-0311, the Tourist Court/Garage.

Motor courts or motels might be considered significant under Criterion C as paradigms of motel design – if they “clearly contain enough of those characteristics to be considered a true representative of a particular type, period, or method of construction.” The surviving buildings of Moore's Brick Cottages (020-0671), and the Wigwam (042-0310), the “ticky-tacky 1940s tourist court with a faux folk log building,” should be evaluated under Criterion C. Other Route 1 motels that may justify evaluation under Criterion C include 020-0665, the Snow White Motel; 020-0666, the White House Motel; 020-0668, the Colony Inn Motel; and the Colbrook Motel.

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