Abstract: Beginning in 2015, the University of Missouri – St. Louis Archaeological Field School has taken place at the site of Regent Spring, a popular mineral water spring in Excelsior Springs, Missouri. The previous surveys of this and surrounding mineral spring sites have left much to be desired. This is in part due to the frequent flooding and subsequent erosion of the nearby Fishing River, which has altered the landscape and topography to a great degree over the past century. Over the course of the first ever archaeological excavation at the Regent Spring site, students at the field school led by Principal Investigator Dr. Daniel Pierce were able to rediscover long forgotten features of this popular turn of the century tourist attraction and subsequently map portions of the site. This project cumulates three years of excavation and mapping, also piecing together primary source documents for the purposes of recreating the original Regent Spring pavilion site. In addition, this research provides context into the use and significance of the site in the context of the overall history of Excelsior Springs at the height of the town’s popularity as a health retreat in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Background: Regent Spring

Originally known as Empire Spring, the pavilion for this spring, with its associated mineral water, was erected in 1886 on the banks of the Fishing River. The surrounding plot of land was used for what would later become Regent Amusement Park, and included a 2100 seat auditorium. At its height, the Regent Spring pavilion provided thousands of visitors from across the country with draughts of the mineral water at a small charge. These patrons would often also visit the bath houses, sanatorium, and other hydrotherapy centers located in town for the supposed curative properties of the various mineral waters. By the turn of the century, business was booming.

In 1935, the spring was acquired by the city of Excelsior Springs and chosen to be one of 10 springs piped into the Hall of Waters, an art deco structure housing the world’s largest water bar which now functions as Excelsior Springs’ City Hall. At this time, the pavilion was torn down, only to remain in the minds of local residents and early twentieth century postcards.

Methodology:

The majority of the research for this project was a collaborative effort from the 2015, 2016, and 2017 LMSI Archaeological Field School students. For two weeks each year, students worked to excavate 1x1 meter or 2x1 meter units near the top of the site, determining the rough location of a gravel path leading down to the pavilion. Evidence of the pavilion itself was never found, though soil cores and shovel tests near the hypothesized location determined the depth of the flood deposit to be quite deep. In addition, remains of a concrete staircase feature, disturbed from its original location by subsequent erosion of the nearby Fishing River, which has altered the landscape and topography to a great degree over the past century, was uncovered, and hypothesized to have led directly down to the pavilion based on orientation and direction. Examination of period documents have confirmed this.

Excavation Conclusions and Further Research:

While ultimately the exact location of the pavilion remains unknown, there was still a great deal gained from our field research. This includes the uncovering of the historic bench, marker, and stairs, all of which were unknown features prior to the field work done. In addition, the work thus far to date at the Regent Spring site has set the stage for further projects, highlighting gaps in the record. Having a better understanding of the flood record for the site and surrounding areas, for example, would greatly aid in locating the depth and migration of any pavilion remains. Ground penetrating radar would also be of use in any future research.

References & Acknowledgements:

• Missouri Department of Natural Resources (2012). Architectural/Historic Inventory From: Excelsior Springs.
• Special thanks to the Excelsior Springs Museum and Archives and the City of Excelsior Springs for use of historic images and postcards. The field school would not have been possible without the help of Kevin and Sonya Morgan, liaisons in Excelsior Springs. Thanks also to all those who participated in the three years of field research, and Dr. Daniel Pierce for research help and assistance with map digitizing.

Context: Excelsior Springs

Known as at the time America’s “ haven of health,” the city of Excelsior Springs was home to an estimated 40 springs and well sites, many of which were turned into sales pavilions and recreation areas, as was the case for Regent Spring in 1888. The cause for the explosion in tourism and resort businesses, including the opening of the famous Elms Hotel also in 1888, was simple. The unique collection of mineral waters in Excelsior Springs, said to be the largest in the world, had supposed healing properties. These rumors were sparked from early settlers’ stories of farmer Travis Mallon’s daughter, afflicted with a skin disease, becoming cured after drinking and bathing in the waters of Silsman Spring. Whether or not the rumors were true, the city was established in 1881 as many flocked to the area.

The period of 1880-1938 was ripe with growth for the city, with a bottling plant, multiple bath and boarding houses, clinics, and a music hall. In 1935 the city took control of many of the springs, piping them into the Hall of Waters, a newly erected Art Deco-style building designed in part by George Koessler. This building features the “World’s Longest Water Bar” and the art and architecture of the structure pays homage to Native American mythology, paralleling the Greek stylings of European bath houses of the period. This building today functions as Excelsior Springs’ City Hall.

Site Re-creation:

Feature: Pavilion

Three old photos and postcards, when compared to the second picture, taken in 2012 for the Missouri Department of Natural Resources site survey, set the hypothesized location of the pavilion in context with the current geography. The water levels of the Fishing River have seriously eroded the bank and washed away any remaining evidence from the largely wooden pavilion. It is known that the pavilion was situated near the Fishing River, and thus the water bar counterbalanced the loss of water. In 1935, the spring was acquired by the city of Excelsior Springs and chosen to be one of 10 springs piped into the Hall of Waters, an Art Deco style building designed in part by George Koessler. This building features the “World’s Longest Water Bar” and the art and architecture of the structure pays homage to Native American mythology, paralleling the Greek stylings of European bath houses of the period. This building today functions as Excelsior Springs’ City Hall.

Feature: Gravel Path

Closer to the entrance of the site away from the stairs and river bank, the largest section of excavated units uncovered a gravel path 10 cm below the surface. Most artifacts from this section were out of context, due to contemporary site use as a city park. This path may have led to the pavilion from a walking bridge to the Elms Hotel identified in historical photos. In 2017, directional quality of the path was determined which ruled out a connection to the Regent Park amusement park less than 50 m away.

Feature: Cement Staircase

Situated on a steep incline before a drop off leading from the upper portion of the site to the lower bank where the pavilion is hypothesized to have been, these cement stairs were uncovered beginning with the first field school in 2015. Based on old photos such as the one on the right, these stairs would have continued to a landing and another set of stairs, one of two entrances to the pavilion itself.

Field school images courtesy of Kevin Morgan

Some conclusions:

In 1935, the city of Excelsior Springs took control of many of the mineral springs, piping them into the Hall of Waters, a newly erected Art Deco-style building designed in part by George Koessler. This building features the “World’s Longest Water Bar” and the art and architecture of the structure pays homage to Native American mythology, paralleling the Greek stylings of European bath houses of the period. This building today functions as Excelsior Springs’ City Hall.