

The Greenbrier's history feels familiar

In times of crises, hotels and other large hospitality venues shift roles.



Jane Dagmi // Editor in Chief

April 21, 2020

It was a Dorothy Draper Design weekend at the Greenbrier in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, and I had been invited along with several other editors to spend time with Carleton Varney, president of [Dorothy Draper & Co.](#), and members of his design team. From the moment I arrived at the resort, I was overstimulated in the very best way, by both visuals and victuals. My favorite photos can be found in the gallery at the bottom of this article.



Carleton Varney and I.

Fortunate to have experienced this escape in early March prior to isolation, the [Greenbrier](#) shut down operations one week later. As coronavirus cases escalated and cities around the world turned convention centers into hospitals and hotels into accommodations for front-line workers, I thought about the Greenbrier and how during World War II it was purchased by the Army and became Ashford General Hospital. I thought this relatable to these times and turned to Greenbrier historian Robert Conte to illuminate the past.



Varney added green pendants to the original chandeliers.

Conte, author of *The History of The Greenbrier: America's Resort*, was hired in 1978 to organize the resort's archives.

"Historical material had been scattered at different places on the property," he says, "and I was tasked with bringing it all together in some semblance of order."



Photo courtesy of the Greenbrier.

As he became familiar with all of "the old stuff," his role broadened to include tour guide and manager of the [Greenbrier History Facebook Group](#) and the [Greenbrier Golf Group](#). Telling the Greenbrier's incredible history to guests and media has always given him great satisfaction.

I asked Conte if he could provide insight and photos of the time between 1942 and 1946 when the government had purchased the hotel from its owners, the C&O Railway, and converted it into a 2000-bed hospital. He furnished me with historic images and explained how Dorothy Draper fit into the picture.

"The use of the Greenbrier as a hospital created the opportunity for Dorothy Draper to undertake her extensive redecoration," Conte explains. Originally built in 1913, the hotel underwent a huge expansion and redecoration in 1930, doubling the number of rooms from 250 to 500. "Had there not been the wartime use, there would have been no reason to hire Draper. In short, it gave the Greenbrier an opportunity to re-invent itself to enter the post war era."

The main dining room was the mess hall. The chandeliers installed in 1931 are original though Varney modified them with green pendants.

Photo courtesy of the Greenbrier.





The hotel reopened in 1948, and today has 700 rooms. The newest wing, The West Virginia Wing, built to include an underground bunker to be occupied by U.S. Congress in the event of war, was added in the 1960s, which is when Carleton Varney first came to the Greenbrier, working as a junior decorator at Dorothy Draper and Co. In his book *Mr. Color: The Greenbrier and other Decorating Adventures*, Varney addresses a note to Draper, saying that his journey with decorating began when he visited the Greenbrier. "I shall continue carrying on the tradition of the gracious style that you first created, and which will never fade."

The final flag lowering in 1946.

Photo courtesy of Greenbrier.

