This Inn stands as a visible expression of appreciation of an unusual physician and of gratitude for the inspiring personality shown in the work of

John George Gehring, M.D.

Charles W. Hubbard, Boston, Mass.      William J. Upson, Cleveland, OH
William Bingham, Cleveland, OH

1913: AN AUSPICIOUS OPENING

The large Tiffany bronze plaque, above, greets visitors in the main lobby of the Bethel Inn. The plaque includes the names of five grateful patients who, in partnership with Dr. John George Gehring, built the Bethel Inn which opened its doors in 1913.

In 1911, The Prospect Hotel, which provided lodging for many of Dr. Gehring’s outpatients, was severely damaged by fire. After a plan to rebuild it failed, five of Dr. Gehring’s grateful patients included him in a partnership to construct the Bethel Inn so people coming to see him for treatment would always have a place to stay in Bethel. The Tiffany bronze plaque is displayed proudly in the lobby in testimony to the Inn’s unique origins.

Under the new owner’s deed, the plaque must be returned to the William Bingham Trust, should it ever be removed from its place of honor. There is no such intention to do so.

DR. JOHN GEORGE GEHRING – THE MIRACLE MAN OF BETHEL

After receiving his medical degree from Western Reserve in 1885, Dr. Gehring practiced surgery in his native Cleveland until he suffered a physical and mental breakdown at the young age of thirty. Seeking rest and recuperation, he chose the mountain air and less frenetic pace of Bethel, where his friends Mr. and Mrs. George Farnsworth lived, to begin his rehabilitation.

His regimen, combining medical, mental and physical therapy was successful and he resumed his practice in Bethel in 1895, focusing on “nervous disorders” similar to his own and using his own unique, self-administered therapies to help others.

Dr. Gehring’s home still stands at the end of Bethel’s historic Broad Street. Gehring House also served as his clinic for patients who were lawyers, corporate executives, writers and other doctors, most quite wealthy (including the New York Vanderbilts) and distinguished in their own right. Bethel became known as the “Harvard of the North” because of the many patients he served from that august institution.

Dr. Gehring has been recognized as a pioneer in recognizing the need to deal with both mind and body simultaneously to provide effective treatment. It is also said that many of his patients, even at the turn of the century, needed help in recovering from the over-use of drugs and alcohol.

His treatment included healthy outdoor activities like chopping wood and weeding gardens, combined with formal dinners at the Gehring home where Mrs. Gehring would preside as a squad of servants presented the elegant courses. Conversation ranged from politics and religion to music and arts; discussion of themselves or personal situations was strictly forbidden.
WILLIAM BINGHAM II, A RECLUSIVE PHILANTHROPIST

One of Dr. Gehring’s patients, William Bingham, deserves special note because of his philanthropic impact on Bethel and New England. Also from Cleveland, Mr. Bingham came to Bethel seeking Dr. Gehring’s help in 1911, at the age of 32. As a result of family tragedies, and a bout with Typhoid fever, he suffered a nervous breakdown and began his recuperation under Dr. Gehring’s care.

William Bingham purchased and remodeled the large green home just to the north and west of Gehring House and spent his summers in Bethel for the rest of his life. He was actively involved in the Bethel society until the 1920’s when a Boston newspaper announced that the wealthiest man in Maine lived in Bethel. The hordes of money seekers this prompted caused him to withdraw from the world, dealing with his affairs solely through his lawyers and advisors.

He would be transported from Bethel’s train station by a black-curtained carriage to his home on Broad Street, unseen during his stay by all but his few friends, including the Gehrings. He would rarely leave his home and even his dentist and barber were imported and did their work at the Bingham residence, protecting his reclusive lifestyle.

Still, he was a man of considerable means and compassion and contributed generously to the New England Medical Center Hospital, the Neurological Institute in New York and hospitals in Lewiston, Bangor, and Portland, Maine. He was a prime benefactor of Bethel’s Gould Academy preparatory school and, of course, the Bethel Inn.

THE GEHRING AND BINGHAM BETHEL LEGACY

Even now, long after their passing more than a half-century ago, William Bingham and Dr. John George Gehring continue to leave their imprint on today’s Bethel.

With the passing of the Gehrings, William Bingham purchased the stately Gehring home for the use of Bethel Inn guests. Then, in the 1950’s, National Training Laboratories purchased the Gehring House and its surrounding property for the grand sum of $6,000, a steal even by mid-century standards.

Until 2010, Bethel was the summer headquarters of NTL’s Institute of Behavioral Sciences, bringing thousands of business and academic leaders from all over the world to training sessions and seminars “dedicated to understanding and developing solutions for productive change in every facet of personal, organizational, and social life” – not terribly far afield from Dr. Gehring’s own endeavors.

Gehring House is in the process of being restored as the center of a new residential community and William Bingham’s home continues as a private residence.

Perhaps William Bingham’s most lasting legacies are Gould Academy and the Bethel Inn which would not have survived without the support he, and later on, his estate so generously provided.

THE 1960’S: HARD TIMES FOR THE BETHEL INN

From its opening through the forties and fifties, the Inn catered to its wealthy summer clientele seeking the crisp climate and beauty of Maine’s western mountains. They arrived from all over the east coast and midwest by carriage, train, then chauffeur-driven automobiles with their servants and steamer trunks in tow for stays
through “the season”. They came back year after year with their families and friends, always staying in the same rooms and dining at the same tables.

The Great Depression and war years created financial difficulties but there was always William Bingham and his estate to tide the Inn through these times.

But by the 1960’s, the Inn’s best days were past, along with the passing of its loyal summer-long guests, and survival was nearly impossible with the changing vacationing habits of the modern traveler. Even with continued Bingham support and a succession of new owners and new investment, the Inn struggled mightily.

Finally, on February 28, 1979 the venerable Bethel Inn closed its doors, perhaps forever.

**1979: A NEW BEGINNING**

Canal Bank of Portland held the mortgage and took over the property from the then owners, Harris-Cayhill Partners. Canal fully expected that the 100-acre, five building complex would have to be sold off parcel-by-parcel, piece-by-piece. But they would make one more effort to sell it as is, a daunting task given sales of only $250,000 and an equal amount in losses, year in and year out.

What better candidate than a 40-year old successful but semi-burned out advertising executive with a marketing background, a hotel upbringing and a few dollars in his pocket?

On May 22, 1979, Richard D. Rasor became the sole owner of The Bethel Inn, its 100 acres, 60 guest rooms, dining rooms, swimming pool, lake house, nine-hole golf course, and cross-country ski trails for the grand sum of $150,000 in cash and a $300,000 mortgage. He had grown up in a 25th floor apartment in Manhattan, raised a family in the suburbs of New York and Detroit, had never operated a hotel, could only cook hamburgers and wasn’t very good at housekeeping.

Rasor’s credentials to take over a virtually defunct full-service hotel in Bethel, Maine were not exactly impeccable, but the opportunity coincided with his two basic objectives: to live in New England where one can ski in the winter and play golf in the summer, and to own a business that was marketing-driven where his prior career at the J. Walter Thompson advertising company would be useful.

In 1979 he envisioned a wonderful lifestyle and growing business but not snowless winters, rationed gasoline, a deep recession and a national banking crisis with ensuing credit crunch. Neither did he envision a forced re-entry to the world of advertising, commuting between clients in New York, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Detroit, London and Bethel on weekends to keep much needed investment capital available.

Still, by 1986 the business had grown to a point where substantial investment and expansion made sense. Since then, the Bethel Inn has grown into the Bethel Inn Resort: From 100 to 200 acres, 60 guest rooms to 150, nine golf holes to 18, a free-standing health club and conference center, and a new casual dining and pub complex. Overall, from 3000 overnight guests a year in 1979 to over 30,000 today.

**POSTSCRIPT**

It is hard to guess what Dr. Gehring, William Bingham and their patients and friends would think of the resort today. Perhaps they might wonder at the impressive growth, the informality, and emphasis on recreational facilities. But perhaps they just might be pleased that their Inn is still thriving beyond its 100th year.

Regardless, the plaque honoring them will remain in its well-deserved place of prominence.