



**Restoring a National Historic Landmark:
President and Mrs. Hoover's
Rapidan Camp**

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Imagine restoring your own home to some point in the past. What time period would you select? How would you decide what to restore? And what alterations would you keep?

Shenandoah National Park is making decisions just like these about the Rapidan Camp that belonged to President Herbert Hoover and First Lady Lou Henry Hoover. We're restoring the Rapidan Camp to its appearance in 1931. This was the time for which it was designated a National Historic Landmark and when the Hoovers used it as their Summer White House. We're determining what to restore by doing extensive archival and archaeological research, conducting vegetation studies to discover what the presidential retreat looked like when the Hoovers were here, and learning how they designed it and what alterations they later made.

You may know the Rapidan Camp as Camp Hoover, a name not used by the Hoovers themselves. As a National Historic Landmark, the Camp has the highest possible mandate for preservation.

We're restoring the three cabins that remain, the constructed water features, the rock-edged walkways, and the vegetation. We'll also mark the sites of the ten wooden buildings torn down in 1962, perhaps with frame outlines.

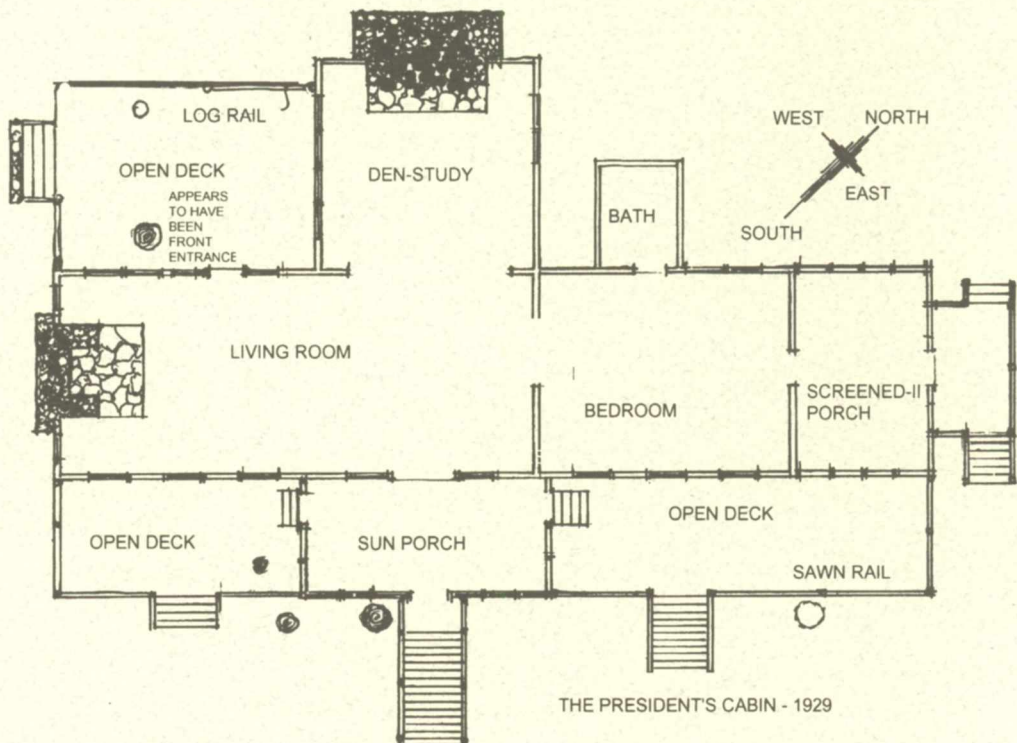
If you walk along the shaded stream banks and through the Rapidan Camp when the restoration is completed, you'll be better able to appreciate the same comfortable charm Mrs. Hoover envisioned when she designed their Summer White House at the headwaters of the Rapidan River. You'll almost be able to smell the brook trout, baked potatoes, strong coffee, and thick steaks frying on the outdoor grill. You'll be able to imagine cabinet members and dignitaries joining the President for a cigar under the rustic pots of colorful native flowers that used to hang from the eaves.

Present State of the Rapidan Camp

It is difficult today to picture the Rapidan Camp that the Hoovers visited on weekends, the Camp that would set the precedent for today's presidential retreat, Camp David. The Rapidan Camp has had many changes, to both the landscape and the structures, since the Hoovers donated it to be included in Shenandoah National Park at the end of his presidency.

In the winter of 1997-98, ice storms damaged the stately forest around the historic Rapidan Camp and elsewhere in the park. Hemlock woolly adelgids have killed many of the large hemlocks. These small insects that look like a little piece of cotton fuzz suck the nutrients out of hemlock trees, and the surrounding forest has slowly moved in to obscure the original designed landscape.

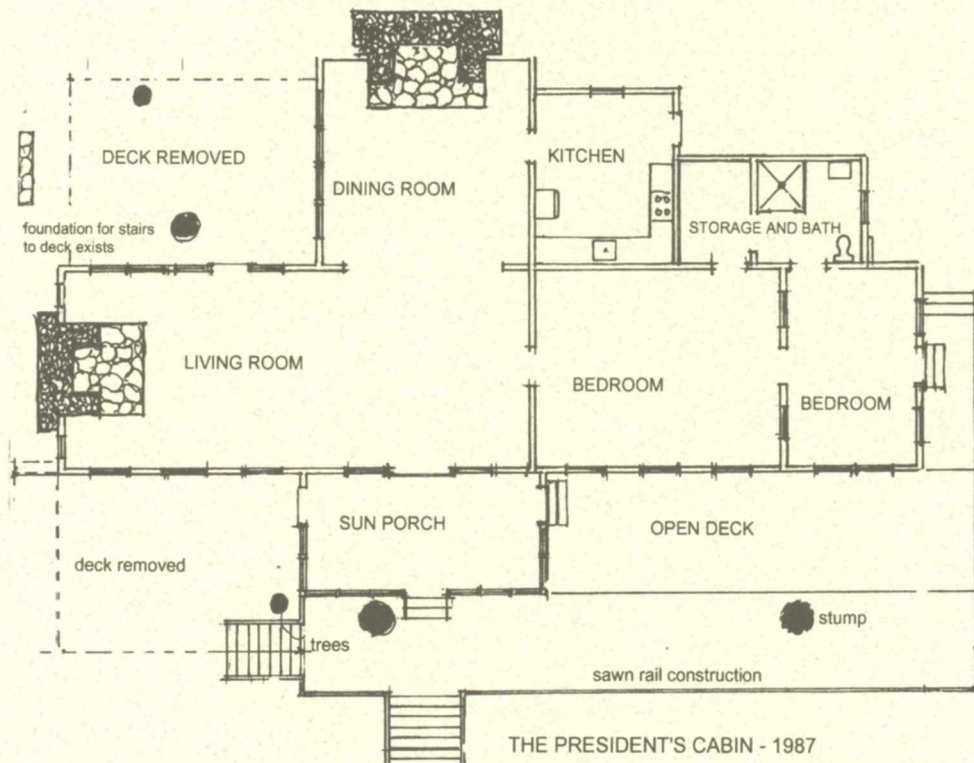
A lot of the structural changes date to the 1950s, when the Boy Scouts leased the Camp, and the 1960s, when it was opened to government officials. The scouts



and the park service altered cabins, filled in some of the water features, and abandoned the rambling gardens and original walkways. Lacking money for repairs, the park service demolished the Mess Hall and nine other buildings.

Today's restoration project includes the maintenance we're doing at the retreat, like carefully pruning or removing dangerous trees. Certified arborists used ropes and pulleys to individually lower broken tree limbs, to avoid destroying the sensitive archaeological material in the ground below.

We're also removing the later cabin additions and restoring original features. In the Brown House, later known as the President's Cabin, we've removed the 1962 kitchen that replaced Mrs. Hoover's bathroom, and we've reconstructed the bathroom. We've removed the 1962 bathroom addition on the Prime Minister's Cabin. We're restoring the president's large tin-lined shower stall. And we've removed the modern inexpensive white paneling that so drastically changed the log frame of the Creel Cabin's interior.



When the restoration is finished in the year 2002, you'll get a better sense of the presidential retreat as the Hoovers saw it. You'll be able to stroll along the actual pathways the Hoovers trod, feel the cold mountain water splashing into the pools below the stone fountain, and imagine the voices of diplomats conferring with the President beside the kidney-shaped trout pond.

And perhaps future generations will be more likely to carry on the preservation than if the Hoovers' Summer White House had been left in its altered condition.

Clues to the Past

To accurately restore the Rapidan Camp, we needed to determine what it looked like during the years the Hoovers used it.

The park's vegetation experts studied the existing herbaceous plants and trees for clues. The stumps of hemlocks, oaks, tulip poplars, and pine trees damaged by the ice storms and adelgids confirmed that when the Hoovers first came here in 1929, the forest was young, mostly deciduous, trees that had been logged several decades before. The major large trees were hemlock which had not been taken by the loggers. Our experts found over 50 orchids (mostly Showy Orchids), mountain laurel, ferns, vines, yellow daylilies, wood asters, sweet cicely, and other flowers. These plants are helping us locate the First Lady's naturalistic planting areas, where she had the White House gardener plant "wild-like" flowers and a profusion of ferns, rather than the roses and carnations of the White House.

Mrs. Hoover had specific intentions for the fishing camp's appearance. Digging through archival records, our historian discovered detailed letters from the First Lady to the architect James Rippin, who designed Girl Scout camps. Mrs. Hoover described the rustic simple buildings and rambling gardens she envisioned to fit in with the woodsy setting of the Hoover's country place:

It seems to me that good board flooring and a roof, with a board strip extending up perhaps 3 feet from the floor . . . with the sides composed of



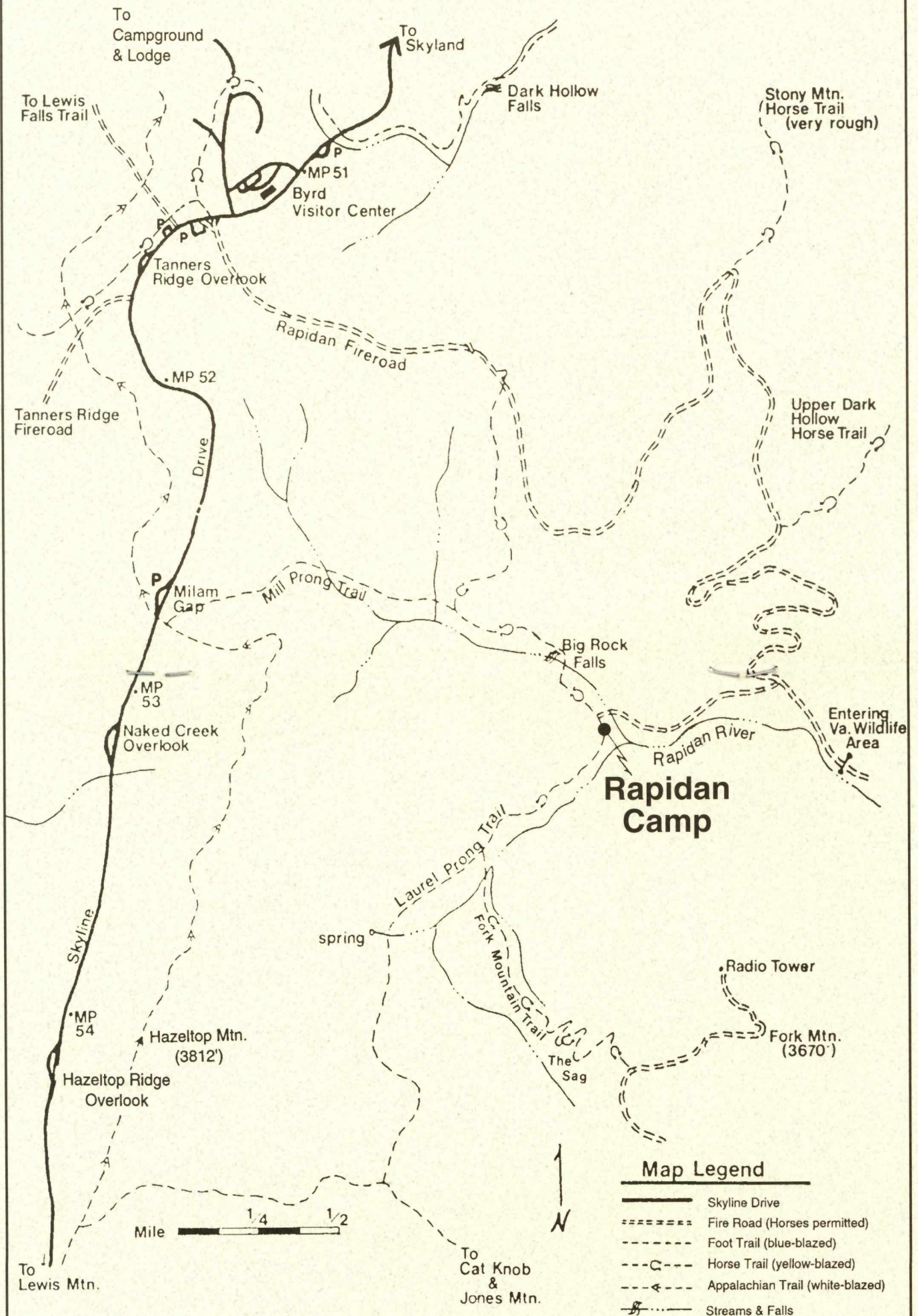
canvas curtains that let up and down as the weather dictates, might answer this year's needs. . . .

There should be no formal beds of plants or flowers but . . . [the gardens] should ramble off into the surroundings. They should not be carefully trimmed nor should the beds be outlined in any way. Some flowers should be planted right along the creek's edge, others overhanging the water.

But we didn't know whether the Rapidan Camp was built as Mrs. Hoover specified, even though the design, the construction, and the alterations during the Hoover years were well-documented.

In combination with archival records, our experts looked at the interiors of walls, construction details, and building materials to read the architecture itself. This study confirmed that the cabins were built as Mrs. Hoover envisioned them: as canvas tents on wooden platforms with low wooden sidewalls. It also verified that there were constant alterations in the early months, resulting in the pine

Rapidan Camp Trail Map



cabins with copper-screened drop-down shutters and inward-opening windows that we have today.

The First Lady's furnishings in deep burnt orange, woodsy greens, and browns contributed to the Camp's picturesque woodland atmosphere:

At present our furnishings are largely borrowed from the "Mayflower" [presidential yacht] . . . deck chairs, some of regular wood and cane, folding ones, other quite nice wicker ones! There are regulation folding card tables, little mahogany ash tables and a nest of tea tables.

We're planning to restore that out-of-doors image by refurnishing the President's Brown House with reproductions and the remaining original pieces.





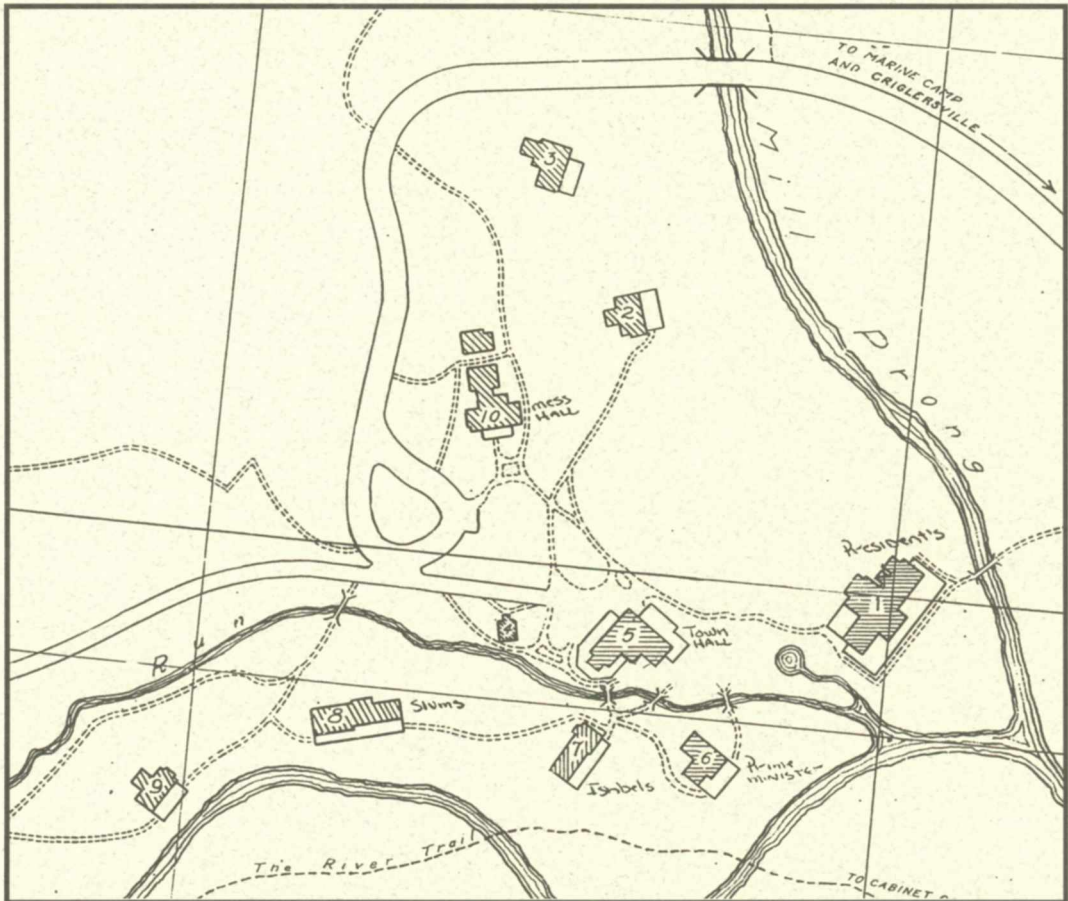
Surprises

Despite the detailed construction documentation, the restoration has led to several surprises because of unrecorded changes made shortly after the Camp was built.

Imagine the surprise of unexpectedly finding carefully-engineered decorative water features buried at the Rapidan Camp. Archaeologists uncovered the Hoovers' concrete-lined trout pond, where their hand-fed rainbow trout became tame. We had only recently come to suspect that it had even existed. Excavation around the First Lady's four-tiered stone fountain and rockery uncovered seven small pools into which the fountain spilled, and we realized it was supposed to be an ornamental cascade rather than a drinking fountain.

Imagine suddenly discovering that one of the massive fieldstone fireplaces in the Brown House didn't exist when the Hoovers first started using the cabin. Historic photographs and investigation of the cabin's architecture revealed that the Hoovers added the fireplace at the end of the south wing after the cabin was built.

And imagine the archaeologists unearthing the extensive rock-edged walkways that directed the presidential couple and their political guests through the Rapidan Camp over 65 years ago. We've located 80%-90% of these Marine-built paths.



This 1931 map of the Rapidan Camp shows the trout pond between Town Hall and the President's cabin (the Brown House). The President's cabin, the Prime Minister's cabin, and Creel (#3) are the only remaining cabins today.

Preservation

Restoration of the presidential retreat is one of many projects funded by the federal fee demonstration program. This experiment in several national parks allows a portion of entrance fees to be used in the parks where they're collected, for maintenance and preservation backlogs. In Shenandoah, we're clearing vistas and restoring historic buildings, and we have reopened Mathews Arm Campground with these funds.

Likewise, a significant portion of your entrance fees is allowing us to return the Hoovers' Summer White House closer to the way they saw it when they came here for their working holidays. You can almost hear the First Lady describing the retreat to her aide:

This camp, - at the end of nowhere, with a road that in wet weather lets you sink to your hubs in slushy mush and while there bump over the most amazing boulders . . . - has electric lights and a telephone and its morning papers. The mail is dropped from an airplane!

This project is part of Shenandoah National Park's increasing awareness of the importance of preserving its cultural resources.

Visiting the Rapidan Camp Today

To visit the Rapidan Camp, you can hike down to the Camp on your own or you can check at Byrd Visitor Center, milepost 51, to see whether guided tours are being offered.

Hikers can visit the Rapidan Camp's grounds today, to listen to the turbulent trout streams, to walk amongst the ferns and mountain laurel, and to relax on the pine porch of the Brown House. You can almost picture the Hoovers strolling across the stone masonry bridge over Hemlock Run. You can imagine stenographers indoors busily typing the President's notes, and perhaps sense the comfortable

ambience that foreign dignitaries and American statesmen enjoyed at the Hoovers' presidential conferences. A hike down the Mill Prong Trail to the Rapidan Camp is 4.1 miles round-trip from Milam Gap at mile 52.8.

The park offers ranger-guided tours of the Rapidan Camp throughout the summer. Join us then to see the Hoovers' Summer White House as it was designed and used by the President and First Lady.





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