

Herbert Hoover

NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE • IOWA

The great advances have not been brought about by mediocre men and women. They were brought about by distinctly uncommon people with vital sparks of leadership. Many of the great leaders were, it is true, of humble origin, but that alone was not their greatness.

—Herbert Hoover



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For your safety, please stay alert for rough flagstone walkways. If you need help, ask a ranger.

Herbert Hoover, world-renowned engineer, humanitarian, and 31st President of the United States, was born in a simple two-room cottage on this site in the village of West Branch, Iowa, on August 10, 1874. Although he spent only the first 10 years of his life here, these years on the banks of the Wapsinonoc (an Indian term meaning "sweet water") left an indelible impression upon this man whose life of public service took him to all parts of the world and won for him distinction everywhere. His life at West Branch, Hoover recalled, was "filled with adventure and great undertakings, with participation in good and comforting things."

"Bertie," as he was then affectionately called, was the second of three children born to Jesse and Hulda Hoover. The family was Quaker and the source of the principles that guided Hoover's life—honesty, loyalty, hard work, cooperation, and generosity. Jesse Hoover, a blacksmith, died from pneumonia in 1880, at the age of 34. His wife died from typhoid fever 3 years later and the orphaned Hoover children went to live with relatives. Herbert moved in with an uncle, Allan Hoover, on the uncle's farm just northeast of West Branch.

At age 11, Herbert journeyed to Newberg, Ore., to live with another uncle, Dr. H. John Minthorn. At 17 he entered the engineering school of the newly opened Stanford University, where he showed a marked aptitude for mathematics. He graduated

with a bachelor of arts degree in geology in May 1895. After working several months in the California gold mines, he became a mining engineer in Colorado and then served on the staff of a leading mining engineer in San Francisco.

In 1897 Hoover joined the international British firm of Bewick, Moreing and Company as chief of mining operations in western Australia. A year later, he accepted a position with the Chinese Engineering and Mining Company, which sent him to Peking in March 1899. (Before going to China, he married Lou Henry, whom he had met at Stanford.) The Boxer Rebellion broke out shortly after the Hoovers' arrival in China, and it was during this conflict that Hoover received his first taste of war and relief experience, doing humanitarian work among the refugees. Late in 1901—after the rebellion ended—he returned to the United States as a junior partner with Bewick, Moreing and Company, whose world-wide interests kept him constantly on the move. "I circled the globe five times" while working for them, he later wrote. He was with the firm 7 years.

With the outbreak of World War I, Hoover (who was then living in England) headed the American Relief Committee in London, which aided Americans stranded in Europe. Later he headed the Commission for the Relief of Belgium. In 1917 he was appointed food administrator of the United States to provide food for the allies in the war and to control domestic production and distribution. This mission later merged into another when, after the Armistice in 1918, he was appointed Director-General of the Relief and Reconstruction of Europe. He held this post until August 1919. Subsequently, Hoover organized the volunteer American Relief Administration, which continued relief until July 1923. His work during World War I brought food to millions of hungry people in more than 33 nations.

In 1921 President Warren G. Harding appointed Hoover Secretary of Commerce, a post he held for more than 7 years under two Presidents. Under Hoover the activities of the Commerce Department were expanded, particularly in the field of foreign trade and communications. When President Calvin Coolidge refused to seek renomination in 1927, Hoover became the Republican Party's leading candidate. He was nominated overwhelmingly and subsequently defeated his Democratic rival, New York's Gov. Alfred E. Smith, by the largest popular and electoral vote that any President had received up to that time.

Hoover's administration had many notable accomplishments, including the signing of the London Naval Treaty, the inauguration of the nonintervention policy in Latin America, reforms of the criminal procedure for Federal courts, bankruptcy legislation, creation of the Federal Power Commission, new banking laws, regulation of stock speculation and securities promotion, expansion of the improvement of waterways, and the conservation of oil and other natural resources. The Reconstruction Finance Corporation was created, as were home loan banks and a new agricultural credit

system to help farmers. Hoover was influential in the convening of a world economic conference to reduce trade barriers and stabilize world currency.

On October 29, 1929, the stock market crashed, triggering an economic depression that did not fully end until World War II. Hoover hoped to relieve the distress by a policy of indirect Government assistance to the masses of unemployed. But despite these efforts, his popularity evaporated. Though renominated on the first ballot at the 1932 Republican convention, Hoover lost the election to the Democratic nominee, Gov. Franklin D. Roosevelt of New York. After Roosevelt's inauguration, Hoover retired to his home in California. He devoted much of his time to the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, once describing it succinctly:

Here are the documents which record the suffering, the self-denial, the devotion, the heroic deeds of men. Surely from these records there can be help to mankind in its confusions and perplexities, and its yearnings for peace.

The purpose of this institution is to preserve the American way of life and to promote peace. Its records stand as a challenge to those who would destroy the freedom in America and who would promote war.

But Hoover's public service was not finished. In 1946, President Harry S Truman asked him to study food supplies and make recommendations for averting a post-World War II famine—a task that took him to 39 countries. In 1947, Hoover was appointed head of a commission to investigate and make recommendations for improving the organization of the Executive Branch of the Federal Government. Congress enacted into law many of the commission's recommendations.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower created a second commission in 1953, and Hoover again served as chairman. After 8 years, and the work of the commissions ended, Hoover finally retired from public life on June 30, 1955. He died on October 20, 1964, and was buried on a hillside overlooking his birthplace in West Branch. A few days after his burial on October 25, the body of Mrs. Hoover (who had died in New York in 1944) was reinterred here.

ADMINISTRATION

Herbert Hoover National Historic Site is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Box 607, West Branch, IA 52358, is in immediate charge.

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