

CATOCTIN MOUNTAIN PARK NATIONAL PARK SERVICE



Camp Hoover: A Brief Report on the Lore of a Presidential Camp on Catoctin Mountain in the 1930s

Prepared For:
P. Scott Bell
Chief of Resource Management

Prepared By:
K.C. Clay, MAIS
Historian

August 2018

Abstract

Confusion abounds concerning the existence of presidential retreats on Catoctin Mountain. Oral tradition insists that Hoover built a fishing camp on the mountain almost a decade prior to Roosevelt's Shangri-La. This apparent duplication of effort is seen as a waste of taxpayer money. Instead, documental evidence indicates attempted exploitation of the federal government by a local land speculator.

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Introduction

For almost ninety years information about the presidential retreats on Catoctin Mountain consisted primarily of word of mouth tales. The truthfulness depended primarily upon the motives of the originator. In the modern era of information access, documented facts are more readily attainable and with minimal effort a more accurate picture emerges.

Historiography

No research has been conducted on the existence of a presidential retreat on Catoctin Mountain during the Hoover administration. It is primarily an oral tradition first recorded in an interview conducted in the early 1970s with William Renner, the caretaker of the purported retreat.¹ National Park Service employees kept the story alive through repeating information from Renner.²

Discussion

Two memories hold sway with people regarding presidential retreats on Catoctin Mountain. The more prevalent one is confusion. For some, Hoover's fishing camp, Roosevelt's Shangri-La, and Camp David all become a single location.³ For others, they could not understand the redundancy of building one camp for Roosevelt at the top of the mountain when another one for Hoover existed lower down the same mountain.⁴

Search for a Camp

Soon after his Inauguration in March 1929, Hoover set his friend and secretary, Lawrence Richey, at locating a suitable summer retreat. Habitually the government recessed during the

¹ William Renner, interview by Catoctin Mountain Park Youth Conservation Corps (hereafter cited as YCC), July 13, 1972; William Renner, interview by Jeanne Romanowski, 1983.

² Mel Poole, interview by John W. Chambers, Catoctin Mountain Park, MD, May 18, 2005.

³ Guy Eby, interview by YCC, Thurmont, MD, July 10, 1975. Changing the name from Shangri-La to Camp David exacerbated the confusion.

⁴ Charles M. Parkin, interview by John W. Chambers, Catoctin Mountain Park, MD, May 18, 2005; Reginald G. Spear, interview by John W. Chambers, Catoctin Mountain Park, MD, May 18, 2005.

summer months because the heat and humidity of the nation's capital, built on a drained swamp, was unbearable. Air conditioning was not yet available in the White House, so the desire for an alternative summer location was not unreasonable.

Hoover had three conditions. The site must be near to the Capital. It must provide good trout fishing- the president was an avid fly fisherman for most of his life. It must be high enough in elevation to avoid mosquitos.⁵

Using Hoover's requirements, Richey found three locations. Two were in Maryland and one was in Virginia. The first Maryland site, known as Glymont, was located on the Eastern Shore in Charles County.⁶ The second site was located in western Maryland on Catoctin Mountain, the easternmost ridge of the Blue Ridge Mountains.⁷ The Virginia site was also in the Blue Ridge Mountains, near Shenandoah National Park and on the Rapidan River.⁸ Each location was highly

⁵ Warren Weaver Jr, "Washington Talk: Presidential Retreats; the Camp That Was Hoover's," *New York Times*, August 14, 1987; "Two Summer Fishing Grounds Chosen for Hoover in Virginia and Maryland," *New York Times*, March 20, 1929. Presumably his concern was less for the annoyance of pesky insects and more for avoiding Yellow Fever.

⁶ John G. Dudley to Lawrence Richey, June 14, 1929; Catoctin Camp, 1929, 1941-1946; Lawrence Richey Papers; Herbert Hoover Library, West Branch, IA (hereafter cited as **HHL-3**); Charles County, Maryland, Land Record, Folio 50, 143-8, Eastern Shore Front Company and Lawrence Richey, April 26, 1929, Charles County Circuit Court, La Plata, MD (hereafter cited as **Glymont**).

⁷ Frederick County, Maryland, Land Record, Folio 370, 331-2, Potomac Hills Development Company and Lawrence Richey, May 4, 1929, Frederick County Circuit Court, Frederick, MD (hereafter cited as **CF-1**); Frederick County, Maryland, Land Record, Folio 370, 452-3, Potomac Hills Development Company and Lawrence Richey, June 11, 1929, Frederick County Circuit Court, Frederick, MD; Frederick County, Maryland, Land Record, Folio 372, 108, August 22, 1929, Frederick County Circuit Court, Frederick, MD (hereafter cited as **CF-3**).

⁸ "Two Summer Fishing Grounds Chosen for Hoover in Virginia and Maryland," *New York Times*, March 20, 1929; "President and Mrs. Hoover Enjoy Outing, Seeking Site in Virginia for Fishing Camp," *New York Times*, April 7, 1929.

ranked for trout density, meeting Hoover's first condition.⁹

Hoover's second condition was that the site must be near Washington, DC. Bearing in mind that traffic patterns have changed in the last ninety years and the Eisenhower Interstate Highway network did not exist yet, Glymont was the closest to the White House at around 28 miles and one hour travel time. Catoctin was under 70 miles away with an approximate travel time of two hours. Rapidan was the furthest away from the executive mansion at over 100 miles and a three to four hour drive.¹⁰ Glymont best fit the distance requirement.

Hoover's third condition was the site must be higher in altitude than where mosquitos live.¹¹ The Glymont property was on the banks of the Potomac River at an altitude of less than one hundred feet. The Catoctin location had an altitude of just over one thousand feet. Whereas the Rapidan site was more than double the altitude at over twenty-five hundred feet.¹² Rapidan clearly towered over the other two locations.

Richey acquired the properties in Maryland. Initially, he bought the almost seventy acre Glymont plot on April 30, 1929.¹³ Purchase price was \$5000.¹⁴ The Catoctin Furnace property took three separate transactions. The bulk of the thirteen hundred and forty-nine acres went in the first purchase on May 4, 1929. The price is unknown, although a resentful local later claimed that

⁹ Maryland Department of Natural Resources, "Brook Trout Fishing in Maryland," Maryland.gov, <http://dnr.maryland.gov/fisheries/pages/brook-trout/maryland.aspx>, (accessed August 2, 2018); Virginia Department of Game & Inland Fisheries, "Brook Trout," Virginia.gov, <https://www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/fish/brook-trout/>, (accessed August 2, 2018).

¹⁰ Google Maps, "Driving Directions," Google.com, <https://maps.google.com>, (accessed August 8, 2018). Selected "Avoid Tolls" and "Avoid Highways" options.

¹¹ The concept of a "mosquito line" is debated by scientists. It is sufficient to note that Hoover did believe it existed.

¹² Vivid Planet Software GmbH, "Map Coordinates," Vivid Planet Software GmbH, www.mapcoordinates.net, (accessed August 8, 2018).

¹³ Glymont, 143.

¹⁴ HHL-3.

Richey paid only \$1 per acre.¹⁵ In truth, the third lot with exclusive trout fishing rights cost Richey \$25 an acre.¹⁶ By comparison, a thirty-six acre, improved lot without a trout stream on the other slope of the mountain went for \$83 an acre a mere five years later in 1934.¹⁷ In contrast, on July 31, 1929, Hoover himself paid outright for the one hundred and sixty-four acres in Rapidan. The purchase price was \$5 per acre.¹⁸ It may appear concern over mosquitos triumphed over distance from Washington with the winning site, but instead it might have been a digging in of his heels by Hoover.

Exploiting the Position

Real estate investors capitalized on Hoover's penchant for trout fishing. While attending a function in Florida, Lancelot Jacques, Senior of The Potomac Hills Development Company approached President-Elect Hoover about checking out some property on Catoctin Mountain. Hoover agreed.¹⁹ Jacques prematurely announced to various news agencies the sale of the Catoctin Manor property for Hoover's fishing retreat. On March 23, 1929, papers across the country carried news of the presidential purchase.²⁰ Twelve weeks later, a nationally syndicated column spread

¹⁵ William Renner, interview by YCC, July 13, 1972; William Renner, interview by Jeanne Romanowski, 1983.

¹⁶ Holmes D. Baker to Lawrence Richey, August 14, 1929; Catoctin Camp, 1929, 1941-1946; Lawrence Richey Papers; Herbert Hoover Library, West Branch, IA (hereafter cited as **HHL-5**). By comparison, a thirty-six acre, improved lot without a trout stream on the other slope of the mountain went for \$83 an acre a mere five years later in 1934.

¹⁷ Frederick County, Maryland, Land Record, Folio 395, 256, Bessie C. Darling (deceased) and Wesley Darling, Aug 4, 1934, Frederick County Circuit Court, Frederick, MD.

¹⁸ Kandace Muller, Museum Specialist at Shenandoah National Park, email to author, August 3, 2018.

¹⁹ William Renner, interview by YCC, July 13, 1972.

²⁰ Associated Press, "Hoover Acquires Own Fishing Hole," *Battle Creek Enquirer*, March 23, 1929; International Newsreel, "In the Heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains," *Shamokin News-Dispatch*, March 23, 1929; Newspaper Enterprise Association, "A Country Retreat for

the word from coast to coast about a magazine advertisement for an additional 2,500 acres and the Catoctin Manor House.²¹ Lancelot Jacques headlined his advertisement for the land as “directly adjoining President Hoover’s summer playground.”²² At this point, Hoover had not affixed his name to any deed for a fishing camp.



Figure 1. Hoover and Richey at Catoctin Mountain, 1936 (NYPL).

Hoover,” *Moberly Monitor-Index*, March 23, 1929; William FitzHugh to Ray Lyman Wilbur, Secretary of the Interior, March 23, 1929; Catoctin Camp, 1929, 1941-1946; Lawrence Richey Papers; Herbert Hoover Library, West Branch, IA.

²¹ Associated Press, “A Washington Bystander,” *Chambersburg Public Opinion*, June 10, 1929; Herbert Plummer, A Washington Daybook, *Havre Daily News*, June 12, 1929; Herbert Plummer, A Washington Daybook, *Wausau Daily Herald*, June 12, 1929; Herbert C. Plummer, A Washington Daybook, *Alton Evening Telegraph*, June 13, 1929; Herbert Plummer, A Washington Daybook, *Asbury Park Press*, June 13, 1929; Herbert C. Plummer, The Bystander in Washington, *Battle Creek Enquirer*, June 13, 1929; Herbert Plummer, A Washington Daybook, *Orlando Evening Star*, June 13, 1929; Herbert Plummer, A Washington Daybook, *Saint Cloud Times*, June 13, 1929; Herbert Plummer, A Washington Bystander, *Salt Lake Telegram*, June 13, 1929; Herbert Plummer, A Washington Daybook, *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, June 14, 1929; Herbert Plummer, Washington Highlights, *Gettysburg Times*, June 19, 1929.

²² Clipping; Catoctin Camp, 1929, 1941-1946; Lawrence Richey Papers; Herbert Hoover Library, West Branch, IA.

Spinning a Yarn

Expectations and half-truths created a toxic environment at Catoctin Mountain. When Richey purchased the land, he received the water rights to the streams on his property.²³ After stocking the water with trout, he expressed surprise that locals were upset over public fishing grounds suddenly becoming private.²⁴ In addition to his property rights, Richey extended his exclusive fishing waters beyond his property boundaries through a lease of water rights from Jacques.²⁵ In years past, Jacques allowed the local fishermen access to the streams on his land, streams now restricted to Richey and his guests. The sudden loss of access led locals to protest the denial of their right to the waters. With much concerted effort, most of the involved parties managed a working relationship for the remainder of the time Richey possessed the land.²⁶

Richey's local warden spun his own tale. The caretaker's story was that Richey cheated a naïve Jacques out of the land. As a result of the swindle, Jacques went bankrupt. Richey on the other hand, profited greatly from the sale of his land.²⁷ However, evidence presents a slightly different story.

Lancelot Jacques, Senior was a land speculator. He purchased properties, created a demand for his lands, and then sold them to others. From the start of the 1900s until his death in December 1932, he made hundreds of land transactions in Washington and Frederick counties, the majority

²³ CF-1, CF-3.

²⁴ "State Send 1,000 Trout to Stock Stream," *Gettysburg Times*, April 8, 1929; "Hoover Angling Site Is Offered for Sale," *Baltimore Sun*, June 19, 1929"; "Jacques to Bar Out Fishermen in Hunting Creek," *Frederick News*, March 31, 1930.

²⁵ HHL-5.

²⁶ "State Send 1,000 Trout to Stock Stream," *Gettysburg Times*, April 8, 1929; "Hoover Angling Site Is Offered for Sale," *Baltimore Sun*, June 19, 1929"; "Jacques to Bar Out Fishermen in Hunting Creek," *Frederick News*, March 31, 1930.

²⁷ William Renner, interview by YCC, July 13, 1972; William Renner, interview by Jeanne Romanowski, 1983.

of which were sales to individuals.²⁸ When the Great Depression cut a swath through American finance, the real estate bubble popped and many of the properties went into foreclosure auction, including his own farm.²⁹

Richey sold his Catoctin property in two lots. A lawyer named Kingman Brewster purchased 891 acres in July of 1932 for an unnamed purchase price.³⁰ The remaining 438 acres sold for \$35,000 in 1946.³¹ Richey had improved his land, so naturally the value at sale was higher than when he purchased it.



Figure 2. Hoovers with pet at Rapidan, 1932 (HHL).

²⁸ Frederick County, Maryland, General Index to Deeds 1916-1941, I-J:19-20; Frederick County Circuit Court, microfilm MSA CE 110-23; Washington County, Maryland, General Index to Land Records 1776-1932, I-J:117-130; Washington County Circuit Court, microfilm MSA CE 247-14.

²⁹ “Public Sale,” *Hagerstown Daily Mail*, January 28, 1933; “Farm Property Is Sold for \$20,000,” *Hagerstown Morning Herald*, February 15, 1933; “Public Sale,” *Hagerstown Daily Mail*, July 8, 1933; “Public Sale,” *Hagerstown Daily Mail*, June 24, 1934.

³⁰ Frederick County, Maryland, Land Record, Folio 385:41-2, Lawrence Richey and Kingman Brewster, July 6, 1932; Frederick County Circuit Court, Frederick, MD.

³¹ Frederick County, Maryland, Land Record, Folio 455:520-2, Lawrence Richey and Capital Cadillac Company, August 21, 1946; Frederick County Circuit Court, Frederick, MD.

Conclusion

The confusion regarding a presidential retreat for Hoover at Catoctin Mountain stems from false publicity claims made by Lancelot Jacques, Senior in an effort to drive up demand for his other lots on the mountain. The ploy failed and Jacques' heirs lost much of his fortune in the Depression. Although Hoover stayed occasionally on Catoctin Mountain, it was as a guest and primarily after he left the White House and no longer owned the Rapidan camp. So, yes, Hoover did fish at Catoctin Mountain, but he did not have a fishing camp on it.

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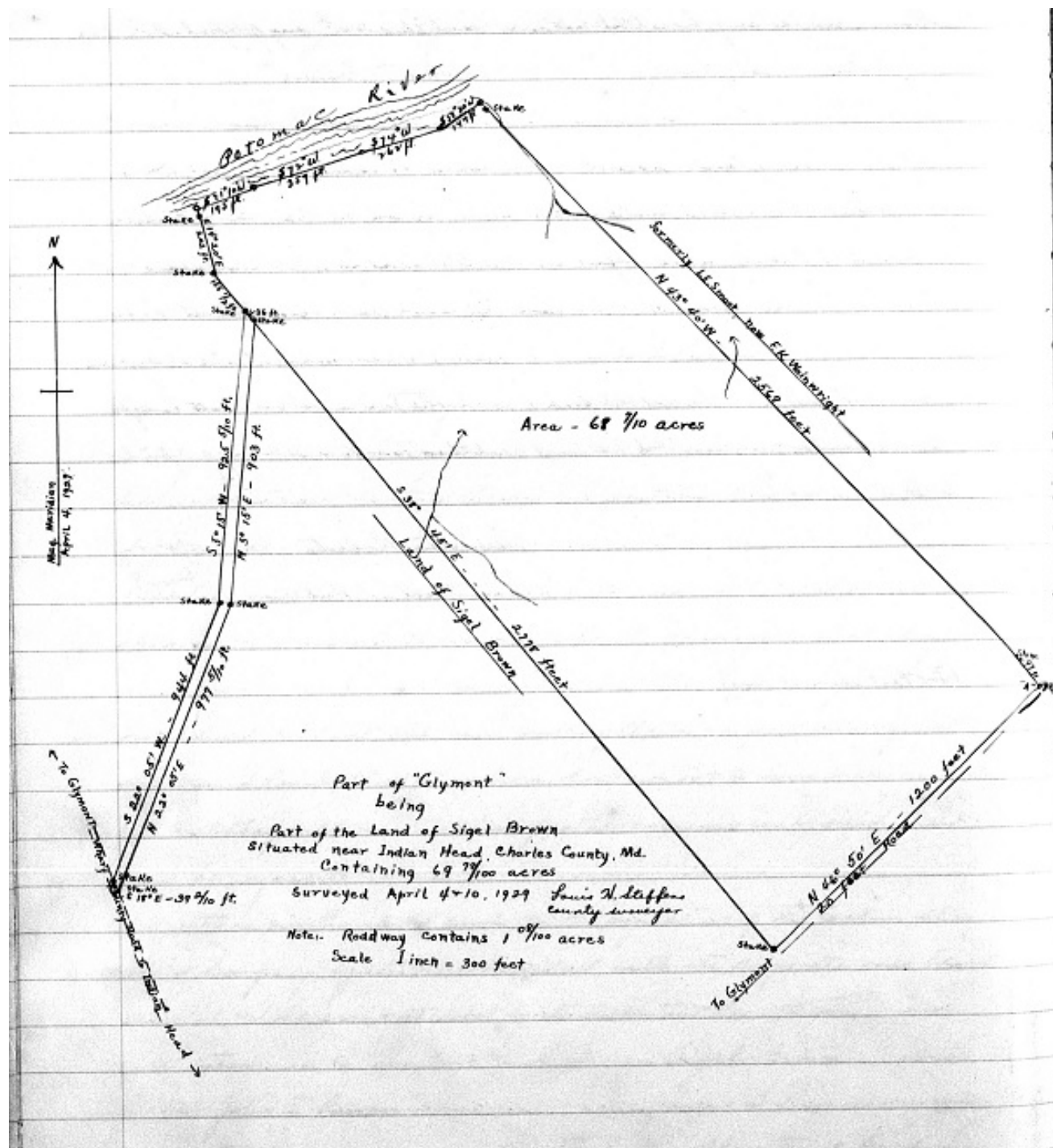


Figure 3. A survey drawing of the Glymont property. MDLandRec.