

MOUNTAIN SPIES

A HIKER'S GUIDE

TO THE

MOUNTAIN SPIES STORY

TRAILS. HISTORY. HIDDEN PLACES.



**HIDDEN HISTORY.
HIDDEN TERRAIN.
HIDDEN HEROES.
ALL IN PLAIN SIGHT.**



*History makes more sense
when you understand the ground
on which it happened.*



Who Is Mountain Spies?

Mountain Spies is a historical research and interpretation project focused on the Catoctin–South Mountain corridor and its remarkable role in American military, intelligence, and national-security history.

From the OSS at Catoctin and military intelligence at Camp Ritchie to Pine Grove Furnace, Camp David, Raven Rock, and Fort Detrick, separate missions repeatedly converged in the same mountains.

For more than thirty years, I have lived in and explored this landscape. Mountain Spies grew from a simple question: **Why here?**

Today, we share that story through research, public programs, and a variety of small-group and VIP historical tours across the region.

This guide brings together some of the region's best hikes, overlooks, historic sites, and mountain communities. We are sharing it with you so you can start your own journey exploring this remarkable landscape and the many historical stories found throughout it.

The answer begins with the terrain itself. This guide is an invitation to explore it.

Catoctin Mountain Park

This is the core Mountain Spies landscape. Long before the OSS arrived, people farmed, logged, quarried, made charcoal, operated mills, and traveled through these mountains. New Deal land acquisition and CCC development transformed much of the area into a federal recreation landscape, and during World War II parts of that same ground became OSS Area B. These hikes let you see the older working mountain and the federal landscape that followed.



Chestnut Nature Trail

Distance: Approx. 1.5 miles

Difficulty: Easy to Moderate

Approx. Duration: 45-75 minutes

Official Map: NPS Catoctin Mountain Park trail information

Why We Recommend It

Chestnut Nature Trail is a good choice for visitors looking for a shorter walk that still provides a strong sense of the interior Catoctin landscape. The trail moves through mature forest and offers a quieter alternative to the park's better-known overlooks.

The History Under Your Feet

During World War II, this part of the mountain was incorporated into the OSS training complex at Area B. The Chestnut area was associated with demolition training, one of several specialized activities conducted across the park's isolated terrain.

That history is not immediately obvious today, which is part of what makes the walk useful. The forest has reclaimed much of the wartime landscape, but the terrain remains. Walking here provides a sense of the separation, concealment, and rugged ground that made the Catoctins useful for training personnel in unconventional warfare.

Blue Ridge Summit Vista

Distance: 0.6 mi. round trip

Difficulty: Easy

Approx. Duration: 45 min.

[Official Map: NPS east-side trail information](#)

Why We Recommend It

For a short walk, this may be the best introduction to the geography of the Mountain Spies story. The overlook opens north across Harbaugh Valley toward the mountains of southern Pennsylvania and gives you a quick sense of how close the Catoctins are to Blue Ridge Summit, Pen Mar, Fort Ritchie, and the South Mountain ridge.

The History Under Your Feet

The view helps explain why geography matters here. Resort communities developed along the ridge in the nineteenth century; the federal government later assembled land for recreation, and wartime organizations found a landscape close to Washington but rugged enough to support training and separation. The missions changed over time, but the terrain remained one of the region's most important constants. In the distance, you can see the Victor Cullen facility, once a tuberculosis hospital, and the Mason-Dixon Line. That boundary also provides useful context for the region's earlier history, including the Underground Railroad and the enslaved workers at Catoctin Furnace, just miles south of Pennsylvania.



Hog Rock - Blue Ridge Summit - Cunningham Falls Loop

Distance: 4.6 mi. round trip

Difficulty: Strenuous

Approx. Duration: 2.5-3.5 hrs.

[Official Map: NPS east-side trail information](#)

Why We Recommend It

This is one of the best all-around Catoclin hikes because it combines overlooks, ridge walking, rock formations, forest, and the descent toward Cunningham Falls. If a guest has time for only one longer hike in the park, this is a strong choice.

The History Under Your Feet

The route crosses terrain shaped by geology, water, and elevation long before the federal period. Those same features later influenced roads, recreation development, military training, and the way people moved through the park. Walking the loop makes clear that the Catoclines are not one uniform mountain block; they are a series of ridges, hollows, drainages, and natural obstacles.

Chimney Rock and Wolf Rock

Distance: 3.9 mi. round trip

Difficulty: Strenuous

Approx. Duration: 2-4 hrs.

[Official Map: NPS Chimney Rock / east-side trail information](#)

Why We Recommend It

This is the hike to take when you want to feel the terrain rather than simply look at it. The climb is steep and rocky, and the ridge-top formations at Chimney Rock and Wolf Rock are among the park's most recognizable features.

The History Under Your Feet

The physical character of this hike helps explain why the Catoclines were valuable for military training. Broken ground, steep approaches, rock, timber, and limited sightlines created a landscape where movement and navigation required attention. Mountain Spies does not claim that every trail was an OSS training route; the point is that this hike lets you experience the same kind of terrain that made the broader mountain environment useful.



Thurmont Vista Loop

Distance: about 2.8 mi. loop

Difficulty: Moderate

Approx. Duration: 1-2 hrs.

[Official Map: NPS Thurmont Vista trail information](#)

Why We Recommend It

Thurmont Vista offers a different perspective from the north-facing Blue Ridge Summit overlook. From roughly 1,500 feet, the view opens east toward Thurmont and the Frederick Valley, making this a useful hike for understanding how abruptly the mountain rises from the populated valley below.

The History Under Your Feet

The contrast between valley and ridge is part of the Catoctin story. Communities, railroads, industry, and agriculture developed below while the higher slopes remained harder to reach and less intensively settled. That separation later helped make the mountain attractive for recreation, federal land acquisition, and wartime uses that benefited from distance without isolation from Washington.

Owens Creek and the Sawmill

Distance: short interpretive walk; longer west-side options available

Difficulty: Easy

Approx. Duration: 30-60 min.

[Official Map: NPS west-side trail information](#)

Why We Recommend It

This is a quieter side of Catoctin and one of the best places to remember that people worked these mountains before they became a park. The reconstructed sawmill and Owens Creek setting make it an easy stop for guests who want history without a strenuous climb.

The History Under Your Feet

An 1857 map recorded several sawmills along Owens Creek, and the reconstructed mill stands on the site of an earlier operation. The west side also preserves traces of former farms and settlements. Later, this broader landscape was absorbed into the federal recreation area and parts of it were used for wartime training. The value of the stop is the sequence: local economy, federal acquisition, recreation, and military use layered onto the same ground. This specific area was identified by the OSS as the "Owen's Creek Obstacle Area," using the period name. Here, operators, commandos, and saboteurs practiced skills for a variety of missions overseas.



Catoctin West Side / National Recreation Trail

Distance: varies by section

Difficulty: Moderate

Approx. Duration: 1-3+ hrs.

[Official Map: NPS west-side trail information](#)

Why We Recommend It

For guests who want fewer overlooks and more landscape, the west side is the place to go. It is quieter, less developed, and better suited to seeing old farm remnants, wetlands, streams, and the interior character of the mountain.

The History Under Your Feet

This is where the park's transformation is easiest to read in the landscape. Families once lived and worked across these slopes. New Deal programs and federal acquisition changed land ownership and use, CCC labor built recreation infrastructure, and the wartime period added another layer. The west side is useful because the historical evidence is often subtle rather than monumental. This area, like Owens Creek, was used by the OSS and later saw expanded use by Camp Ritchie for night maneuver exercises.



Pen Mar, High Rock, and Monterey Pass

North of Catoclin, the ridge becomes a different kind of historical corridor. Pen Mar and Blue Ridge Summit were major summer destinations, while Monterey Pass carried travelers and armies across South Mountain. Camp Ritchie later rose nearby, and the Cold War added Raven Rock to the broader landscape. These hikes connect recreation history, Civil War geography, resort development, and twentieth-century military use while keeping their separate missions and periods clear.

Appalachian Trail: Pen Mar to High Rock

Distance: about 5.5-6 mi. round trip, depending on start

Difficulty: Moderate

Approx. Duration: 2.5-3.5 hrs.

[Official Map: Appalachian Trail interactive map](#)

Why We Recommend It

This is one of the signature walks along this section of South Mountain. Starting near the old Pen Mar resort landscape and following the Appalachian Trail toward High Rock gives you ridge walking, long views, and a direct feel for the narrow mountain spine separating communities east and west of the ridge.

The History Under Your Feet

Pen Mar was once a major resort destination served by rail and visited by thousands. A few miles away, Camp Ritchie later became one of the U.S. Army's most important military intelligence training centers. High Rock itself is primarily a scenic destination, but the walk between these places helps explain the larger setting in which recreation, transportation, communities, and military institutions accumulated along the same ridge.



Appalachian Trail: Foxville Road via Devil's Racecourse toward High Rock

Distance: route length varies by turnaround

Difficulty: Moderate-Strenuous

Approx. Duration: 2-4 hrs.

[Official Map: Appalachian Trail interactive map](#)

Why We Recommend It

This is the rougher alternative for hikers who want more geology and less developed scenery. The boulder-strewn Devil's Racecourse area and the climb toward the ridge make the terrain itself the main attraction.

The History Under Your Feet

South Mountain is defined by hard rock, narrow passes, steep slopes, and limited east-west crossings. Those physical constraints shaped travel long before the military arrived and continued to matter when twentieth-century installations, roads, communications, and training areas were placed in the region. This route is valuable because it makes the geology impossible to ignore.

Monterey Pass Battlefield Park

Distance: short interpreted trail system

Difficulty: Easy-Moderate

Approx. Duration: 45-90 min.

[Official Map: Monterey Pass Battlefield Park visitor information](#)

Why We Recommend It

This is one of the most useful short historical walks in the region. The park's interpreted trail system is compact, but the setting makes clear why a mountain pass could become strategically important during the Gettysburg Campaign. The overlook also provides a clear view toward the Raven Rock Military Complex.

The History Under Your Feet

On the night of July 4, 1863, Union troops attacked elements of Lee's retreating army and wagon train during a violent storm at Monterey Pass. The battlefield preserves only part of the larger action, but it demonstrates a recurring truth of South Mountain: movement depends on passes, roads, and gaps through difficult terrain. Decades later, different institutions would again value the same broader geography for very different reasons.



Happel's Meadow and the Monterey Pass Landscape

Distance: short walk

Difficulty: Easy

Approx. Duration: 30-60 min.

[Official Map: Monterey Pass Battlefield Park visitor information](#)

Why We Recommend It

This is a good slower option for guests who want to explore the Monterey area without committing to a longer hike. The meadow and adjoining preserved lands add wetlands, forest edge, and open mountain scenery to the battlefield experience.

The History Under Your Feet

The value here is context. Monterey Pass was not simply a battlefield point on a map; it was part of a settled and traveled mountain landscape connected to the Great Wagon Road, nearby communities, farms, resorts, and later military activity. Walking the preserved landscape helps put the pass back into that larger human geography.



Michaux State Forest and Pine Grove Furnace

Michaux deserves more than one stop. This landscape preserves ironmaking, charcoal production, CCC work, Appalachian Trail history, wartime military activity, and one of the most unusual sites in the Mountain Spies corridor: Camp Michaux. It also contains some of the best overlooks and forest hikes in the region, making it a destination for both history and recreation.

Camp Michaux - Former CCC and POW Camp

Distance: about 2 mi. walking route

Difficulty: Easy

Approx. Duration: 1-1.5 hrs.

[Official Map: Camp Michaux walking-tour map](#)

Why We Recommend It

This is the most important historical walk in Michaux for the Mountain Spies story. The forest has reclaimed much of the site, but roads, foundations, markers, and other remains still allow visitors to reconstruct the footprint of the camp on the ground.

The History Under Your Feet

The site began as a Civilian Conservation Corps camp before being adapted for wartime use. During World War II, it became a prisoner-of-war camp where captured German personnel were screened and interrogated. Camp Michaux was part of the broader American system for handling and exploiting enemy prisoners, while Fort Hunt served a separate role in strategic interrogation.

Pine Grove Furnace Historical Walking Tour

Distance: Short walking tour

Difficulty: Easy

Approx. Duration: 45–75 min.

[Official Map: Pine Grove Furnace State Park information](#)

[Historical Guide: Camp Michaux Interior Guide \(PDF\) — print pages 28–29 before your visit.](#)

Why We Recommend It

Do this before or after Camp Michaux. The furnace stack, Ironmaster's Mansion, Appalachian Trail Museum, and surrounding industrial landscape make Pine Grove Furnace one of the best places to understand how this part of South Mountain developed before it became part of the wartime story.

The History Under Your Feet

For Mountain Spies, Pine Grove Furnace matters because it helps explain the landscape that later supported Camp Michaux and the wartime use of South Mountain. Long before wartime intelligence organizations and German POWs arrived in the region, this was already a working mountain landscape shaped by iron production, roads, labor, forests, and access through the gaps. During World War II, nearby Camp Michaux added another layer as a military installation and prisoner-of-war camp. Pine Grove Furnace shows how the Mountain Spies story did not begin with the war; it was built on a landscape that had already been used, altered, and connected for generations.



Pole Steeple Overlook

Distance: 1.5 mi. round trip

Difficulty: Most Difficult / steep

Approx. Duration: 45-75 min.

[Official Map: Pine Grove Furnace trail information](#)

Why We Recommend It

This is the classic short climb at Pine Grove Furnace. It is steep, but the quartzite outcrop at the top provides one of the best views over the park, Laurel Lake, and the surrounding Michaux landscape.

The History Under Your Feet

The overlook is useful because it lets you read South Mountain from above. The ridges, lower valleys, water, and forest are all visible in one frame. The rock itself also tells part of the story: resistant quartzite helped create the high ground while softer formations eroded below. Geography influenced where people traveled, worked, built, trained, and later preserved land for recreation.

Pole Steeple - Appalachian Trail - Mountain Creek Loop

Distance: about 4 mi. loop

Difficulty: Moderate-Strenuous

Approx. Duration: 2-3 hrs.

[Official Map: Pine Grove Furnace park map](#)

Why We Recommend It

For hikers who want more than the quick Pole Steeple climb, this loop combines the overlook with a section of the Appalachian Trail and the lower Mountain Creek landscape. It gives you both ridge and valley in one outing.

The History Under Your Feet

This route is a useful cross-section of Pine Grove Furnace. The Appalachian Trail brings the modern recreation story into a landscape already shaped by ironmaking, logging, roads, and later conservation. The contrast between the steep quartzite ridge and the water-rich lower ground makes the physical logic of the landscape easy to see.



Sunset Rocks

Distance: approximately 6-8 mi., depending on route

Difficulty: Strenuous

Approx. Duration: 3-4.5 hrs.

[Official Map: Michaux State Forest public-use map](#)

Why We Recommend It

Sunset Rocks is for guests who want a longer, rougher Michaux hike with a real payoff. The rocky ridge and views make it one of the more memorable outings near Pine Grove Furnace, and route variations allow experienced hikers to connect it with the Appalachian Trail and the Camp Michaux area.

The History Under Your Feet

The Mountain Spies value is the terrain. Michaux can look gentle from a road, but this route shows how quickly the forest becomes rocky, broken, and difficult to cross. That character shaped settlement, industry, recreation, military use, and the preservation of large blocks of forest across South Mountain.

Rocky Knob Trail

Distance: about 4 mi. loop

Difficulty: Moderate

Approx. Duration: 2-3 hrs.

[Official Map: Michaux State Forest hiking information](#)

Why We Recommend It

Rocky Knob is one of the best local-history hikes in Michaux because the trail itself carries New Deal history. It moves through a less-visited part of the forest and rewards hikers with varied terrain rather than a single destination overlook.

The History Under Your Feet

The Civilian Conservation Corps attempted to build a road through this area in 1937 but the rugged geology defeated the project. Later Youth Conservation Corps work helped create the hiking route used today. It is a small but tangible example of a larger Mountain Spies theme: federal programs did not simply occupy the landscape; they physically reshaped access to it.



Buck Ridge Trail: Pine Grove Furnace to Kings Gap

Distance: 6 mi. point-to-point

Difficulty: Most Difficult

Approx. Duration: 3-4 hrs. plus shuttle planning

[Official Map: Michaux State Forest hiking information](#)

Why We Recommend It

This is the choice for experienced hikers who want a serious South Mountain traverse. It connects Pine Grove Furnace with Kings Gap through rocky Michaux terrain and requires transportation planning because it is point-to-point.

The History Under Your Feet

The trail reinforces how long and continuous the South Mountain ridge really is. The Mountain Spies story often focuses on particular sites, but the broader corridor works because those sites sit within one connected mountain system. A traverse like Buck Ridge replaces the map-view abstraction with actual distance, elevation, and terrain.

Hiker-Biker Trail: Furnace Stack to Laurel Lake

Distance: 3 mi. out-and-back

Difficulty: Easy

Approx. Duration: 1-1.5 hrs.

[Official Map: Pine Grove Furnace trail information](#)

Why We Recommend It

This is one of the best family-friendly choices in the guide. The route is accessible, passes Fuller Lake, follows portions of the old railroad-bed corridor, overlaps the Appalachian Trail, and reaches the Laurel Lake area without requiring a steep climb.

The History Under Your Feet

This walk is valuable because transportation and industry are visible even on an easy recreation route. Railroad grades, furnace history, water, and later trail systems occupy the same narrow landscape. It is a reminder that today's recreational paths often follow routes created for very different economic purposes.



Koppenhaver Trail

Distance: 1 mi. loop

Difficulty: Moderate

Approx. Duration: 45-60 min.

[Official Map: Pine Grove Furnace trail information](#)

Why We Recommend It

A short, quieter loop through pines and hemlocks near Pine Grove Furnace. This is a good recommendation for guests who want a forest walk rather than an overlook and who may already be visiting the furnace, museum, or Camp Michaux.

The History Under Your Feet

The trail passes remnants associated with an old Girl Scout camp and follows streams through a landscape repeatedly adapted for industry, camps, conservation, and recreation. It is not central to the intelligence story, and that is precisely why it belongs: understanding the corridor requires knowing the communities and uses that existed alongside the military history.

Beaver Trail / Long Pine Run

Distance: about 2.6 mi. round trip

Difficulty: Moderate

Approx. Duration: 1-1.5 hrs.

[Official Map: Michaux State Forest public-use map](#)

Why We Recommend It

This is a quieter Michaux recommendation for guests who want water, forest, and fewer people. Long Pine Run adds a different visual character from the rocky overlooks and furnace landscape around Pine Grove.

The History Under Your Feet

Not every meaningful landscape feature is a military site. Water, drainage, roads, and forest management shaped where people could live and work, and how federal and state lands were later managed. Long Pine Run is a good place to see the preserved natural system that ties much of Michaux together.

A Note from Mountain Spies

These recommendations follow the same approach we use on our tours: start with the landscape, then ask what happened there and why. The Catoctin-South Mountain corridor was never one military complex or one story. Different communities, agencies, industries, and generations used the same mountains for different purposes, and walking the ground is one of the best ways to understand both those distinctions and the geography that connects them. We hope you enjoy the journey!