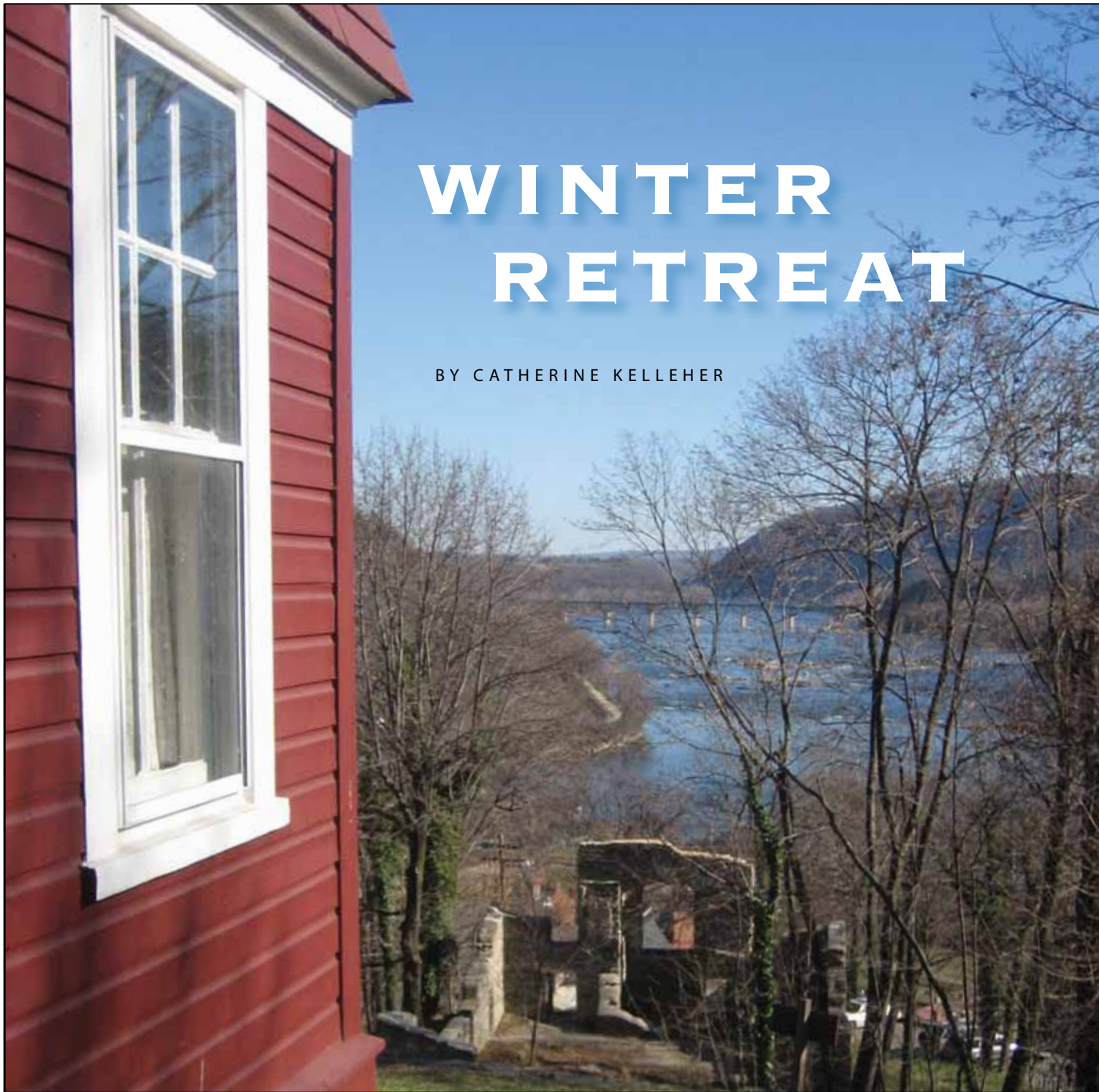


# WINTER RETREAT

BY CATHERINE KELLEHER



Wouldn't it be nice, when you're not quite ready for a day on the Trail to end, to grab a drink, linger on a cabin porch, and watch dusk descend? When your stomach asserts itself, you stroll inside, get the wood stove going, and put the start of supper in a big cast iron pot. Later, as the group is recounting the day, your mind wanders to how many others have sat in these same, cozy surroundings.

Not everyone is lucky enough to have their own cabin in the woods, but since the 1930s, the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (PATC) has been enabling many to enjoy that experience. The club currently maintains 34 cabins that are available for daily rental, some by the public, some limited to PATC members. The cabins range considerably in size, age, and location, but invariably provide a wonderful base for nearby hiking. For proximity and majestic setting, a standout is Highacre, a four-bedroom Victorian house in Harper's Ferry, West Virginia with a commanding view of the Potomac River, just above the remains of the pre-Civil War St. John's Episcopal Church. The A.T. runs along the other

side of the property's stone fence. Many people, though, are happy to forgo running water and electricity and spend their time in a rustic cabin. Within range of an errant snowball from the A.T. are Pocasin, Milesburn, Myron Glaser, Doyles River, and Bear Spring, variously located in Shenandoah National Park, Northern Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania.

Proximity to the Trail is half of the equation; the other is proximity to parking. Some cabins are steps away and others require a hike of several miles, which could be even longer due to winter road closures. "Drive up" cabins are the easiest for parents with small children. They also make it possible for those unable to walk distances to nevertheless enjoy a cabin retreat with friends or family. Staying in a one- or two-room log cabin in which generations of mountain families were raised can be as much of an adventure and learning experience as exploring nearby trails. Retrieving water from a spring, gathering kindling, and splitting firewood turn out to be a lot more time consuming than textbooks convey.



*Highacre (left) offers a commanding view of the Potomac River in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia; photos by Showalter Custom Photo. Mutton Top (above) in Virginia is a modern day creation built around a two-story-high, limbed tree trunk; photo by Catherine Kelleher.*



Cabins are popular throughout the year but particularly so in winter. Cabins are rented to a single party, and capacity varies from four people to well over a dozen. Some allow pets, others do not. Missing out on a first choice may mean instead staying in an early 1800s cabin with wooden peg joinery (Weaver), a stone worker's cottage from the 1700s (Catoctin), a modern day creation built around a two-story, limbed tree trunk (Mutton Top), or a cabin with a long porch and some oddly stacked, triple level bunks (Michener).

The relatively low cost of cabins is made possible by the cooperation of renters and the enthusiasm of volunteers. Rentals turn over without an intervening visit from any housekeeper because each renter makes sure to clean up before they leave and also to report any issues in conditions when they arrived. Each cabin has an assigned overseer to check up on it periodically and perform routine maintenance. Recruiting assistants is particularly desirable when a cabin requires a hike in. Backpacker friends are in demand when there is a need to transport cement mix a couple of miles to patch a floor. PATC cabin supervisors ensure the facilities in their districts are getting proper attention and coordinate more significant repairs, such as

a new roof or a new privy. There are also longer term projects to build or restore cabins and bring them into the system.

While families and groups of friends are appreciative of the cabins, many Trail maintainers are also beneficiaries. A number of cabins in the PATC system were originally constructed or acquired to house Trail workers. Uses these days might include the Pennsylvania chapter's monthly gathering at Gypsy Spring cabin for supper after work on the nearby A.T. or shelters, or participants in a chainsaw certification course overnighting at Tulip Tree in Shenandoah.

Many become fans of the warming capabilities of a wood stove. Small size can be an advantage; at 10 square feet, tiny Sugar Knob cabin can go from 20 to 60 in no time flat. Others, like Meadows, have two stoves. Whatever the arrangement, part of the fun of a cabin is discovering its unique characteristics and knowing that it's waiting to accommodate a group of hikers unwinding from their adventures on the Trail.

For more information visit:

[www.potomacappalachian.org](http://www.potomacappalachian.org)

Wood stoves help keep visitors cozy and full at Silberman (top left) in Pennsylvania and Michener (bottom left);

Weaver (center top) is an 1800s cabin with wooden peg joinery; photos by Catherine Kelleher.

Doyles River (above) in Shenandoah National Park is only a few steps from the A.T.; photo by Steve Bair.