

I would venture that any nature lover can trace their roots back to one special place where they first encountered the power of wilderness. For me, that spot is Robert E. Lee Park, more commonly known as Lake Roland.

Sure, I've seen more impressive places (the Adirondacks, the Alps, the Pacific Northwest), but—and it's a little embarrassing to admit this—for me, nothing compares to the six miles of shoreline along this man-made lake that sediment runoff is turning into a swamp. It was here, off Falls Road, just north of the city line, that I developed the sense that nature can provide a sense of adventure and historic discovery.

I first laid eyes on the place in my middle school years, during a late-summer bike ride. I was bored out of my mind, ready to write the whole summer break off as a loss, when I came upon the park. I figured it must have been named after Robert E. Lee for a reason. My imagination supplied one when I discovered the abandoned railroad tracks running through the park. I pictured Civil War skirmishes and Rebel raiding parties, and hidden artifacts just waiting to be found. I followed the rails through the brush as if I'd stumbled on the ruins of a lost society. I was terribly disappointed when I found my way to Falls Road and the onrushing traffic.

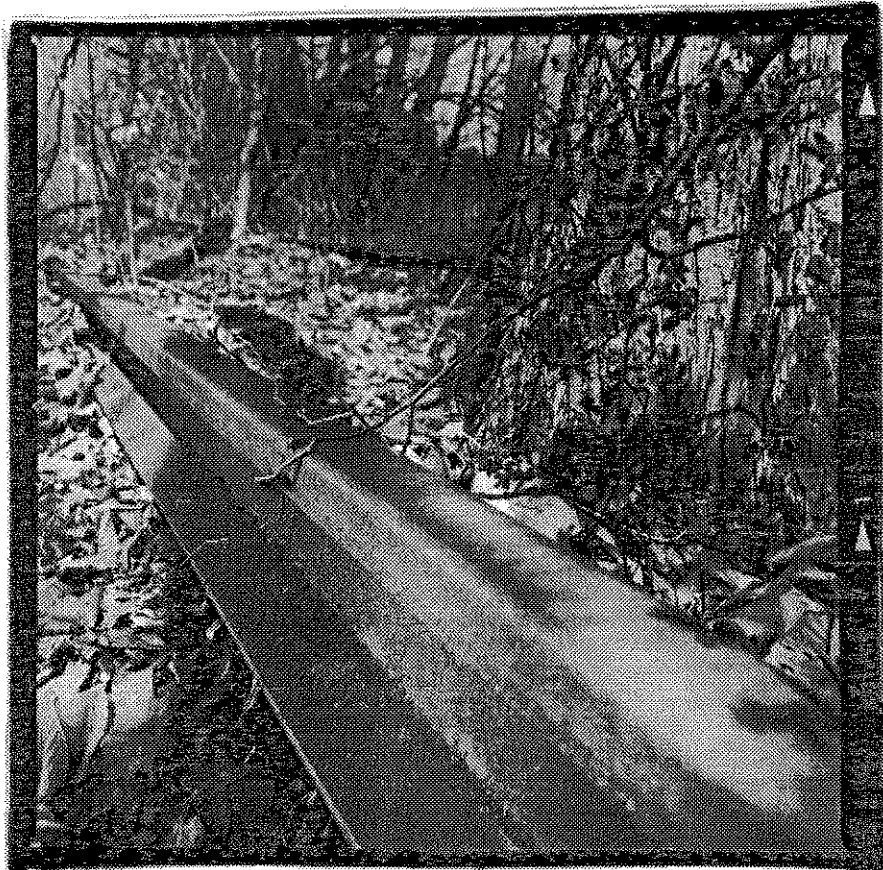
I'd later discover the tracks were merely remnants of the Northern Central Railway, and the park's name was the result of a philanthropist's request rather than the marking of a historical event. Nonetheless, from that day forward I developed a love for historical wreckage. Give me the ruins of an old grist mill drowning in vines and my imagination starts churning. I prefer my history raw, with no metal markers.

Sure, my logical, civic-minded half believes in historic preservation, but my artistic side greedily digs the patina of ruin. Walking those old railroad tracks is like coming upon a forgotten Jones Falls Expressway that's turned into one long trelis for weeds. I think about the passenger cars hurtling through this tunnel of tree limbs toward Baltimore and get as close as I ever will to time travel. But after a recent stroll, I figured it was time to spoil the illusion and dig through the written record of newspaper clippings and old documents, to get some real history to go with the imagined one.

As it turns out, there *was* some relatively



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minor Civil War action here, or at least hereabouts: In 1861, Baltimore Mayor George William Brown—vexed by the federal occupation of his city—directed police and Rebel sympathizers to tear up some of Northern Central's tracks (though not the ones in the park), according to *The Story of the Northern Central Railway* by Robert L. Gunnarsson, which was published in 1991.

## Trains of Thought

More discoveries: There was a train station called Relay (not to be confused with the existing community of Relay, near Catonsville) at the southern tip of the lake, just west of where the light rail runs now; it burned down in the 1930s. On July 4, 1854, a brutal train wreck occurred three-quarters of a mile north of the Relay station; two trains full of day-trippers collided. The crash killed 35 people and injured more than 100.

Perhaps it's fitting that, while the mighty

Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) Railroad has its own museum, little remains of the Northern Central, a much-loved underdog in its day according to Gunnarsson.

The Northern Central started out as the Baltimore and Susquehanna in 1828, a year after the founding of the B&O. While the B&O went west, the B&S headed north along Jones Falls. The stretch of tracks through what is now Robert E. Lee Park was known as the Green Spring Valley line. In 1832, according to Gunnarsson, horse-drawn carriages trotted up the rails to Relay, where a fresh team was hitched and headed toward

the Green Spring Hotel and station. But the Green Spring line was destined to be a secondary line—the B&S opened another northbound route from Cockeysville through Monkton and into York, Pa. This became the main rail route out of Baltimore for the Northern Central, which arose out of a merger between the B&S and another railroad company. Northern Central was taken over by the Pennsylvania Rail Road, which ran up into the coal-rich areas of northern Pennsylvania; occasionally, walking along Lake Roland, you can still find bits of coal and smelted iron ore.

At its peak, though, the Northern Central was a commuter system, linking rural Maryland communities to Baltimore. Twenty-seven trains each day ran between downtown and Mount Washington, and lines such as the Parkton Local and the Ruxton Rocket developed loyal followings. As the 20th century advanced and cars became more ubiquitous, the Northern Central Commuters Association and the state Public Service Commission wrangled with the company to keep the passenger lines open.

But they were only delaying the inevitable; ridership continued to dwindle through the 1950s. The Northern Central's final commuter run came on June 27, 1959. Long-distance passenger trains continued to use the tracks until 1972, when Hurricane Agnes wrecked the rails.

Now, this pioneering vein of early American commercial railroading is the domain of mountain bikers and dog walkers; only the occasional unidentified piece of foundation or length of wooden bridge reveal clues to the park's history. But there's still the sense of discovery here, the feeling that you might stumble on some relic or long-forgotten story. That sense of discovery will always bring me back. ■