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Hiking Abandoned Railroad Trails around Baltimore

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The benefits of regular exercise for our physical and mental well-being are well known. This was

especially true during the height of the pandemic, and many of us took the opportunity to get out and walk around our neighborhoods, Quarry Lake, Meadowbrook Park and other local nature areas. Baltimoreans are also blessed to have beautiful walking/hiking/biking trails along local abandoned railroad lines. In addition to the exercise, these make for a wonderful family outing on Chol Hamoed Sukkos or anytime. Described below are some of the most accessible and popular.

The Northern Central Railroad (NCR Trail), officially known as the Torrey C. Brown Trail, runs for nearly 20 miles in Maryland, starting from Ashland Road (just off Paper Mill) in Hunt Valley to the Mason-Dixon Line. It then continues as the York County Heritage Trail into Pennsylvania, ending in York. The trail is part of the East Coast Greenway, a 3000-mile trail that connects 15 states and 450 cities and towns from Maine to Florida. For 134 years, from 1838 to 1972, the NCR carried passengers and freight between Baltimore and York and led to the growth of small towns all along the route. During the Civil War, Union troops were transported south on the railroad from military training camps in the north. Abraham Lincoln traveled on the NCR on the way to deliver his Gettysburg Address, and later, after his assassination, his body would be transported to Harrisburg on the same line. Increasing truck and automobile competition marked the decline of the railroad, and its death knell was in 1972 when Hurricane Agnes washed out bridges and made the line impassable. The Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) converted the abandoned rail bed into a multiuse trail in 1984.

The well shaded, wheelchair accessible NCR trail has a hard-packed limestone surface and is 10-feet wide. While mostly flat, there is a gradual elevation of 540 feet from the south to north ends. Ideal for hiking, walking, running, and biking, the trail can also be used for horseback riding. There is also access to the Big Gunpowder River for trout fishing and tubing. Pets are welcome but must be kept on a leash while on the trail. The heavily wooded and very scenic trail runs along the Gunpowder River with nice waterfall viewing just north of Whitehall.

There is ample parking on paved lots all along the trail in Ashland, Sparks, Phoenix, Monkton, Whitehall, Parkton and Freeland. Access to parking in Ashland is off of York Road, while access to other parking areas is off exits from I-83. In Sparks there is a Nature Center, and in Monkton, a former railroad station has been converted into a ranger station. Restroom facilities (often Spot-a-Pots) are available near some of the parking areas. The NCR is very popular, especially on holidays and Sundays, and parking areas often fill up early. However, the trail is much less congested at the northern end above Monkton, especially on weekdays.

Lake Roland Park, centered in the Jones Falls Valley, provides over 500 acres of an exceptionally diverse ecosystem of wetlands, meadows, hardwood forests, rare serpentine rock barrens, and many endangered species of shrubs and trees. The first chromite mines in the U.S. were established here in the early 1800s. The park is leased from Baltimore City but managed by Baltimore County in partnership with the Lake Roland Nature Council. Recreational and educational features include many shaded trails for walking, running, hiking, and biking, a Nature Center staffed by park rangers, a dog park, two picnic pavilions, a children's nature play area, and an area to launch kayaks and canoes. A paved parking area can be accessed off Falls Road just north of Lake Avenue. There is also park access from the Falls Road MTA station via a boardwalk located at the rear of the MTA parking lot. Although technically illegal, some visitors use informal shoulder parking along Falls Road just south of Old Court.

The area encompassing Lake Roland was part of an 18th century land grant from Lord Baltimore to several Maryland families. The centerpiece of the park is the reservoir (man-made lake) that was formed in the 1850s as a water source for the city of Baltimore. One remaining structure from those days is the beautifully restored Greek Revival stone pump house that sits adjacent to the dam and waterfall. The MTA light rail line runs along a former railroad embankment and trestle over the lake and above the dam, cutting the park into a two-thirds wooded northern section and a one-third southern portion around the dam, picnic groves and pavilion. The right-of-way of the former Northern Central Railroad, which ran from Baltimore to Harrisburg, PA, is near the southern end of the lake. This part of the park also includes a portion of the

former Greenspring Valley Railroad right-of-way, along which trains ran from Lake Roland and through the Greenspring Valley before meeting up with the Western Maryland Railroad near Reisterstown Road.

Informative trail maps are available at the Nature Center or on the park website. Most trails are packed down dirt and may be muddy after rainstorms. The most popular two-mile red trail and 0.8-mile blue trail are level, but other trails (purple and orange) leading to environmentally sensitive areas are moderately hilly and rocky. Along the red trail there is interesting trail art, a mid-century modern home inspired by Marcel Breuer, remnants of abandoned tracks and ties from the Northern Central Railroad and, on warm sunny days, great turtle viewing at the southeast end of the trail.

Dogs are welcome on the trail but must be leashed at all time, even when wading in streams. Park rangers are on the lookout to fine violators. Unfortunately, except for the pavilion area, the park is not handicap accessible. The park is busiest on Sundays and holidays, times when parking might be tight. At other times parking is not a problem and the trails are not too crowded.

Stony Run Trail is a somewhat undiscovered urban gem providing a great outdoor nature experience in the northern section of Baltimore City. The walking/running/biking path runs for 2.8 miles following Stony Run Creek parallel to Charles Street and Roland Avenue through 15 Baltimore neighborhoods, including Roland Park, Guilford, Hampden, Tuscany-Canterbury and Remington. Starting at the Gilman School athletic fields, the trail passes Friends School, Loyola University, and the edge of the Hopkins campus, ending at 33rd Street and Wyman Park Drive. One could call it a very “educational walk.” At its midpoint, the trail passes Linkwood and Oakdale Parks, and at the end of the trail, one can easily walk to the Hopkins Homewood Campus and the Baltimore Museum of Art. Between Wyndhurst and Coldspring Avenues, there are parallel paths on either side of the creek which can be crossed at both ends. There is one short stretch after Linkwood Park where one has to walk on a neighborhood sidewalk and across a short pedestrian bridge which leads to Oakdale Park, a popular spot for unleashed dog running. At its southern end, the trail narrows and is at a higher elevation than the creek providing lovely views of wetlands and a forested, gorge-like setting, making one forget that he/she is in the middle of Baltimore City. The trail is mostly level over packed-down dirt with some roots and loose gravel. Well maintained by the City and Friends of Stony Run, the trail is well shaded and even after wet weather, is rarely muddy. A detailed description of the trail can be found at Baltimorecityparks.com.

Stony Run sits on the former rail bed of the Maryland and Pennsylvania (Ma & Pa) railroad, which was established in 1901 to carry passengers and freight from Baltimore to York, PA, via Towson and Bel Air along a meandering and very scenic 70-mile journey. Loss of a U.S. mail contract and competition from cars and trucks led to the discontinuation of passenger service in 1954 and a complete shutdown of the line in 1984. When walking the trail, one can still see remnants of soot from the coal-fired steam engines on the underside of bridges spanning the former rail line.

When Gilman School is not in session, its parking area off Northern Parkway provides direct access to the north end of the trail. Other access points with street parking are available at Wyman Park Drive and Sisson Street, University Parkway at Linkwood, Stony Run Park at West Coldspring Lane, and Wyndhurst Avenue and Wilmslow Road. The trail is not handicap friendly, and there are no restrooms available. Dogs are welcome but must be leashed, except in Oakdale Park. Except on Sundays and holidays, Stony Run is not very crowded.

The next time that someone tells you to “take a hike,” thank them for their advice, grab your sneakers or hiking boots, and head for one of these great abandoned railroad trails.
