

# Hiking the Poole Road- Pouder Road Liberty Reservoir Trail

CASUAL OBSERVATIONS SUPPORTING THE REMOVAL OF  
“DECOMMISSION” STATUS

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## Introduction

Liberty Reservoir, also known as Liberty Lake, was purchased by Baltimore City in 1954 to supply public water to metropolitan Baltimore. It is the newest of three Baltimore City owned reservoirs managed by Baltimore's Department of Public Works (BDPW). In addition to Baltimore City, Department of Public Works supplies drinking water to Baltimore, Howard, Harford, Carroll, and Anne Arundel counties (Baltimore City Department of Public Works).

Water from Liberty Lake is transported 12.7 miles to Ashburton Water Filtration Plant for treatment to remove contaminants such as trash and debris, viruses, bacteria, organic chemicals, and storm-water runoff (Baltimore City Department of Public Works). Baltimore "consistently meets or exceeds all federal standards" for clean drinking water for its 1.8 million residential and business consumers (Baltimore City Department of Public Works).

Liberty Reservoir consists of 6,100 acres with 4,664 acres remaining as natural woodland (Mittenhall, p.17). It has a length of 11 miles and 81 miles of shoreline (Wikipedia, Liberty Reservoir). The reservoir's 163 square mile drainage area primarily collects water from eastern Carroll County and southwestern Baltimore County (Baltimore Environmental Police).

Liberty Reservoir is available for hiking, fishing, birding, and boating. Equestrians use sections of the reservoir's trails for horse-back riding. There are a number of recreational trails throughout Liberty Reservoir that are described as being "surprisingly varied and interesting" (Mittenhall, p.17). In her book The Baltimore Trail Book, Mittenhall identifies *Morgan Run* trail, which includes Poole Road-Pouder Road trail, as being diverse with "some of the most varied scenery in the Liberty Reservoir area" (Mittenhall, p. 20). A hiker on *Morgan Run* trail will experience a variety of scenery that ranges from open space to woodlands, stream crossings, and in some locations, challenging terrain.

Several years ago Baltimore Department of Public Works made a decision to "decommission" some of the trails in Liberty Reservoir, including sections of the *Morgan Run* trail referred to as *Poole Road-Pouder Road*. By

“decommissioning” trails, Baltimore Department of Public Works no longer assumes responsibility for trail maintenance. In addition, use of “decommissioned” trails for any passive recreational activity such as hiking or birding is no longer allowed. There were several reasons later cited for “decommissioning” some of Liberty Reservoir’s trails: preserve and possibly improve water quality by letting the trails revert back to nature; and, to better manage under-staffed law enforcement resources by reducing service areas. It is noted that no research exists supporting any association between water quality and low frequency equestrian activity, hiking, biking, birding, or fishing.

There was no formal announcement or discussion regarding the “decommissioning” trails decision. The public using these trails were not asked to provide any input or suggestions. Generally, individuals unknowingly using “decommissioned” trails would find out by word-of-mouth, or on occasion, be informed by Baltimore Environmental Police while using the trail. Imagine being told you could no longer enjoy taking a hike or birding along trails you had enjoyed for decades. That, in effect, passive recreational activities like hiking are allegedly impacting water quality. There is no logic in this decision based on the reasons stated by BDPW.

The consequences of “decommissioning” some of the trails in Liberty Reservoir has likely had the opposite effect on water quality. By relinquishing responsibility for trail maintenance invasive plants have taken over large areas of Liberty Reservoir that are contiguous to or nearby “decommissioned” trails. Invasive plants have virtually destroyed areas in Liberty Reservoir’s understory compromising wildlife habitat, disrupting the Reservoir’s ecosystem, and reducing wildlife diversity that is critical to human survival.

Sections along “decommissioned” trails are severely eroding away, depositing soil through runoff into Liberty Lake. Increasing sediment into Liberty Reservoir can kill marine plants that help sustain a healthy and balanced ecosystem that promotes clean water. In addition, invasive plants from Liberty Reservoir, namely Japanese Stiltgrass, Garlic Mustard, Oriental Bittersweet, and Japanese Barberry have encroached on to neighboring communities. It is difficult and expensive to manage or control

invasive plants once they become established on residential properties. Invasive plants may also adversely affect the value of residential property.

### Poole Road-Pouder Road Trail

According to residents living along the Poole Road-Pouder Road trail, the trail extending from Morgan Run to Little Morgan Run existed at the time Liberty Reservoir was built. Residents recall Boy Scouts planting pine tree saplings, and watching water in the reservoir rise to its current level, forever transforming the landscape over time. Fishing spots accessed from the trail became known for their seemingly abundant trout and large mouth bass. Wildlife such as deer became more common as trees grew and plants diversified. The increasing deer population brought in cross-bow hunters during hunting season.

The Poole Road-Pouder Road trail has always been popular with hikers challenged by the terrain but rewarded by the diversity of plants, insects, and wildlife. Birds were attracted to the diversity of vegetation and insects so the trail was popular for birdwatching. There are a large variety of birds that call the trail “home” even if it’s seasonal for some, including Indigo Bunting, Scarlet Tanager, Pileated Woodpecker, Eastern Towhee, Ruby Throated Hummingbird, Wild Turkey, and various raptors such as Red Shouldered Hawk and Bald Eagle.

Hiking is the predominant recreational activity but the trail is also used for biking and horseback riding. The Track Team from Liberty High School used the trail for practice and the trail is also used by the Eldersburg Rogue Runners. Scouts used the trail for hiking and to earn Merit Badges. It was not unusual seeing families use the trail on weekends.

### Hiking the Trail in Pictures

The following Poole Road-Pouder Road trail pictures were taken on Wednesday, May 18<sup>th</sup> between the hours of 9 AM and 1:30 PM. The hike started at the Morgan Run bridge at London Bridge Road and ended at Little Morgan Run. This section of the *Morgan Run* trail is referred to in this

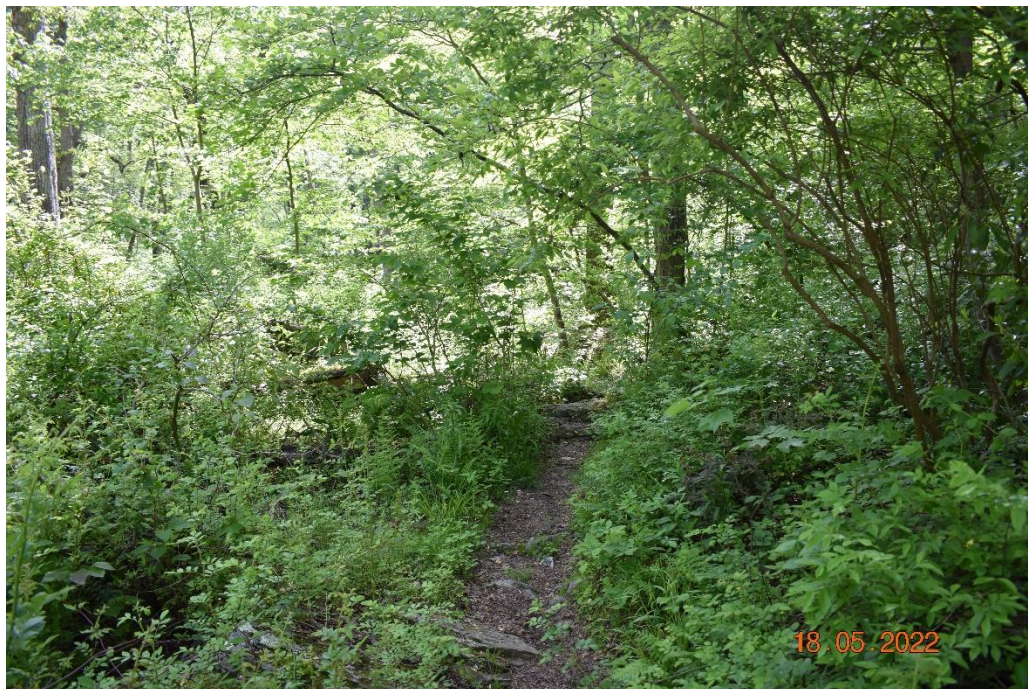
document as the “decommissioned” Poole Road-Pouder Road trail. The Poole Road-Pouder Road trail is located proximate to Liberty Reservoir’s border perimeter. Each picture has a brief description and latitude-longitude coordinates in decimal degrees obtained through Google Maps.

The hike starts at the bridge and follows in part along Morgan Run, a healthy environment with diverse vegetation, large variety of birds, insects, and wildflowers. Invasive plants were spotted along this part of the trail but they don’t appear to be a major threat at this point in time. In general, this section of the trail can be described as “healthy”. As the hike proceeded south along the trail it became apparent that invasive plants, in some areas, had already taken over much of the trail and adjoining reservoir areas. The consequences are clearly shown in the pictures: lack of plant diversity, compromised understory, increased erosion, and habitat destruction. The pictures can’t show the concomitant declines in wildlife although reductions in the number and variety of birds was apparent towards the end of the trail at Little Morgan Run. The intent here is to show through pictures the value of Poole Road-Pouder Road trail as a recreational resource, and the impact “decommissioning” is having on this valued resource.

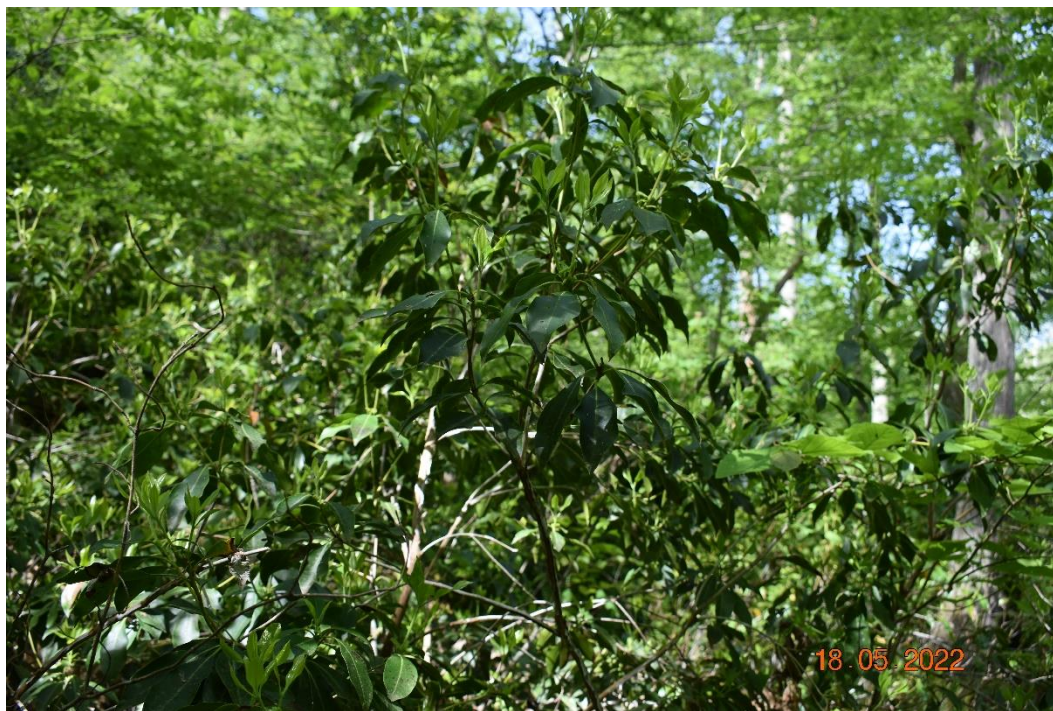


Picture 1: Start of the hike. The bridge on London Bridge Road. Morgan Run constantly flows although the flow rate varies relative to storm runoff. Most of the time Morgan Run is slow moving with varying depths ranging from one to five feet. A sandpiper was observed along the northside shore. In the past cormorants have frequented Morgan Run, along with beavers. This area was filled with birds. Pileated Woodpeckers were busy pecking trees in search of insects and a mate. This beautiful bird, with its red crested head, has a unique song. It is shy and hard to spot but its presence is known by the “hard” knocking sound it makes in the woods.

(39.451896, -76.954583)



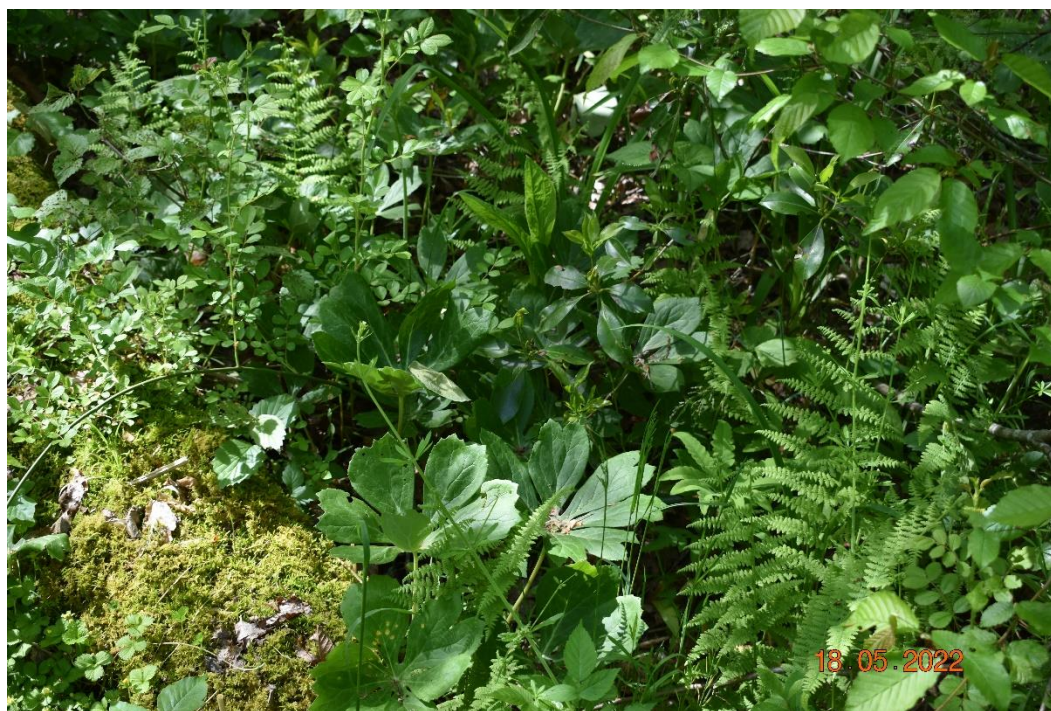
Picture 2: Proceeding south on the trail. This part of the trail had a large number of Mountain Laurel that will bloom within the next week. In addition to Mountain Laurel there were also wild azalea, Mayapples, ferns, Trillium, and a variety of wildflowers. This photo shows the diverse vegetation along this part of the trail (39.451816, -76.954618)



Picture 3: Mountain Laurel is abundant along this part of the trail. Buds on the Mountain Laurel will open up in about a week as a fragrant flower. (39.451816, -76.954618)



Picture 4: Wild azalea. Beautiful white flower with a pink stamen. Some plants were over five feet tall. The plants are in full bloom now. (39.45214, -76.952472)



Picture 5: This picture shows the diverse assortment of plants growing in proximity to Morgan Run. Shown in this picture are mayapple plants, ferns, trillium, and other assorted vegetation. (39.451830, -76.953512)





Picture 6: Trillium. This plant grows in early spring and starts producing flowers in one to two weeks. Trillium are not common so its presence reinforces the value of vegetation diversity. (39.450304, -76.949251)



Picture 7: This picture shows a healthy understory. Note the large variety of plants. The trail appears on the lower left side. (39.452118, -76.952482)



Pictures 8-12: Left side of trail. Assorted wildflowers along this part of the trail.  
(39.452131, --76.952459)



Picture 9: Right side of trail. (39.451809, -76.953252)



Picture 10: Right side of trail. (39.451849, -76.953319)



Picture 11: Right side of trail. (39.452068, -76.952887)



Picture 12: Right side of trail. (39.449503, -76.949088)



Picture 13: Although no beavers or beaver dens were spotted on this hike the recent downed tree clearly shows beaver activity in the area. (39.449817, -76.948856)



Picture 14: Poole Road ends here. The Poole Road-Pouder Road trail continues on the left. As you proceed south on the trail towards Pouder Road invasive plants become more apparent (39.448621, -76.950242)



Pictures 15: Shows a group of ferns but fewer wildflowers are noted. Vegetation still shows some diversity but is less dense due to fallen trees. (39.445485, -76.950255)



Picture 16: Japanese barberry is becoming more prevalent along the trail. This invasive plant is inexpensive and is still used for landscaping. This plant produces a red berry that can't be digested by birds or small mammals. It grows quickly, crowding out native vegetation as it spreads. (39.451386, -76.950773)



Picture 17: Trail continues south, but the trail splits east towards Liberty Lake. People use this trail to access fishing spots along the Lake. (39.448621, -76.950242)



Picture 18: As Poole Road-Pouder Road trail continues south a hiker will begin to encounter Garlic Mustard (left side). Garlic Mustard is taking over large areas along the “decommissioned” trail. It has a distinctive white four flower cross and a root that resembles a “S”. Garlic Mustard grows early in the spring, crowding out other emerging native flowers. It also releases a chemical that is toxic to surrounding plants. Garlic Mustard has been known to kill fully mature trees. The plant spreads by sending out thousands of seeds that can last 5 years in the soil. It can be easily pulled out but the large number of plants makes manual removal difficult and time consuming. As a result, Garlic Mustard is rapidly spreading along “decommissioned” trails. Information on selected invasive plants is available on Friends of Liberty Reservoir’s website Blog. (39.442728, -76.949151)



Picture 19: Poole Road-Pouder Road trail diverges again towards Liberty Lake. Although, this section of the divergent trail leads to some excellent fishing locations, it is best known for leading to several historic headstones belonging to the Bennet family. (39.442384, -76.949064)



Picture 20: Historic headstones associated with the Bennet family dating to early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Picture archived from an earlier hike. Coordinates unknown.





Picture 21: Pouder Road, Gate 17. There are two trails: Poole-Pouder Road, and a second trail that continues Pouder Road as a dirt trail towards a popular fishing spot on Liberty Lake. As a hiker proceeds south on the Poole Road-Pouder Road trail the number and variety of native plants are being crowded out by invasive plants such as Japanese Stiltgrass, Oriental Bittersweet, Mile-A-Minute vine, Garlic Mustard, and Japanese Barberry. (39.440991, -76.949985)



Pictures 22 and 23: Japanese Stiltgrass is starting to emerge from seed. This invasive is taking over large sections of the Reservoir adjacent to “decommissioned” trails. Japanese Stiltgrass

smothers the Reservoir's understory. It is an annual that emerges from thousands of seeds that overwinter. This invasive has a five year seed bank. Plants can thrive in almost any type of condition. It is extremely difficult to remove once established. This invasive plant is now encroaching on neighboring residential properties. (39.440298, -76.951236)



Picture 23: Shows Japanese Stiltgrass along with fallen trees likely weakened by Oriental Bittersweet vines. (39.440298, -76.951236)



Picture 24: Oriental Bittersweet climbing a pine tree. Note the damage sustained by the pine tree with its missing branches and bark. The weight of this vine is heavy enough to weaken trees that finally succumb to storms and winter weather. As a result, there are large areas along this “decommissioned” trail that were once filled with pine trees, but are now virtually empty of vegetation because Japanese Stiltgrass prevented new saplings from emerging.

(39.439320, -76.952202)



Picture 25: Oriental Bittersweet and Japanese Stiltgrass work together to create barren areas devoid of native vegetation. It will be difficult but not impossible to reestablish native plants in these areas. Eventually these barren areas will spread to create large swaths of empty land that will increase storm runoff and concomitant sediment deposits in Liberty Lake

(39.439136, -76.952271)



Picture 26: Japanese Barberry is another invasive plant that becomes more prevalent as a hiker goes south on the trail towards Little Morgan Run. The seeds cannot be digested by birds and small mammals. As a result, Japanese Barberry has quickly spread throughout large areas of Liberty Reservoir along “decommissioned” trails. It is not uncommon to find this plant growing in flower beds. It is difficult to remove due to its deep roots and thorns. (39.438201, -76.952903)



Picture 27: Compare this photograph to Picture 7. This understory is clearly threatened and not healthy. The understory in this picture is being threatened by invasive plants that left large areas devoid of native, diverse vegetation. (39.436202, -76.953669)



Picture 28: The lack of maintenance is clearly apparent in this picture. Grass and other vegetation, including invasive plants, are growing on the trail. The trail will disappear if this continues. (39.434046, -76.956577)



Picture 29: The end of Poole Road-Pouder Road trail at Little Morgan Run. It is presumed to start the Hodges Road trail located on the other side of the stream. Hodges Road trail is another trail “decommissioned” by Baltimore DPW. (39.433458, -76.957186)

### Concluding Remarks

Baltimore City recognized the recreational potential its Reservoirs had by allowing hiking, boating, fishing, and birding on Reservoir properties. Carroll County residents are fortunate to have access to excellent passive recreational facilities such as Liberty Reservoir. At a time when one out of five American children is clinically “obese” we should be encouraging more outdoor activities (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

It is not logical to “decommission” trails in Liberty Reservoir, particularly trails such as Poole Road-Pouder Road that have been actively used since Liberty Reservoir was created. Passive recreational activities on Reservoir properties do not interfere with Baltimore’s ability to provide safe, clean drinking water. To the contrary, “decommissioning” trails may have the opposite effect by increasing runoff and sediment deposits in Liberty Lake due to reductions in native vegetation that leads to more erosion. The trails in Liberty Reservoir are unique in its diversity of plants and animals, and its challenging hiking terrain. It is not reasonable, therefore, to close down *some* of the trails in Liberty Reservoir, particularly trails that have been actively used for decades.

It was also disappointing that Carroll County citizens and government were totally unaware of this decision. There was no opportunity for comment or input regarding BDPW's decision to "decommission" or close trails that had been actively used and appreciated by residents and visitors for many years. The opportunity to publicly comment on BDPW's decision could have potentially averted the situation we have today with invasive plants, and their possible detrimental impact on water quality.

Justification for "decommissioning" *some* of the trails in Liberty Reservoir seems misguided. It appears the only justification is to save money. It is also not clear why *some* of the trails were "decommissioned" while other trails in Liberty Reservoir remain open for use. This is because the decision was made without comment from those most affected by the trail closures. It is not too late to correct some of the damage done by removing the "decommission" status from Poole Road-Pouder Road, as well as the other "decommissioned" trails in Carroll and Baltimore Counties. Inaction will, in time, prove to be consequential to the 1.8 million water consumers in the Baltimore Metropolitan area.

### Sources

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