

Historical Background Notes for the GHS Spring Hike to Liberty Dam

Notes prepared by John Brantley, May 25th, 2026



Aerial Photo of Liberty Reservoir from a 1950s Postcard.

The Liberty Reservoir grew out of the “Legislative Act of the Patapsco Water Basin”, signed in 1931 by the Maryland governor, which granted Baltimore City the right to convert any part of the Patapsco valley in Baltimore, Carroll and Howard Counties into a lake and watershed. By 1951 the city had acquired 9,000 acres of property along the North Branch, 200 parcels of land, 400 buildings; the buildings were auctioned in 1945 to those who wanted to either dismantle or remove them. Two entire villages were to be submerged under the newly created lake, North Branch and Oakland. Both towns were early manufacturing centers and between them 5 mills were demolished: Bollinger’s Mill, Ivy Cotton Works, Ivy Paper Mill, Cockey’s Mill, also called Benson’s Factory, Allen’s Mill, a grist mill started in 1762, predating the Ellicott Brothers mills, and the largest, The Melvin Woolen Mill, which dated back to 1796 and was once owned by Enoch Pratt. The Melvin Mill was often called Oakland Mill because it owned the town of Oakland, a company town with 60 tenant houses, a store, a schoolhouse and a public meeting hall. The Oakland Mill was located about 2 miles north of the current Liberty Rd bridge just downstream from the junction of Morgan Run with the North Branch. The river made a C-shaped bend at that spot so that the mill was actually surrounded by the river on 3 sides. Also demolished was the Cloverland Farms Dairy Park, a recreation area located on the Baltimore County side of the river near the village of North Branch. The park opened in 1930. It provided access to boating and swimming in the waters of the North Branch. It featured a dairy bar, a tea room, a baseball diamond where local sandlot teams played and a large hotel, formerly the North Branch Inn.



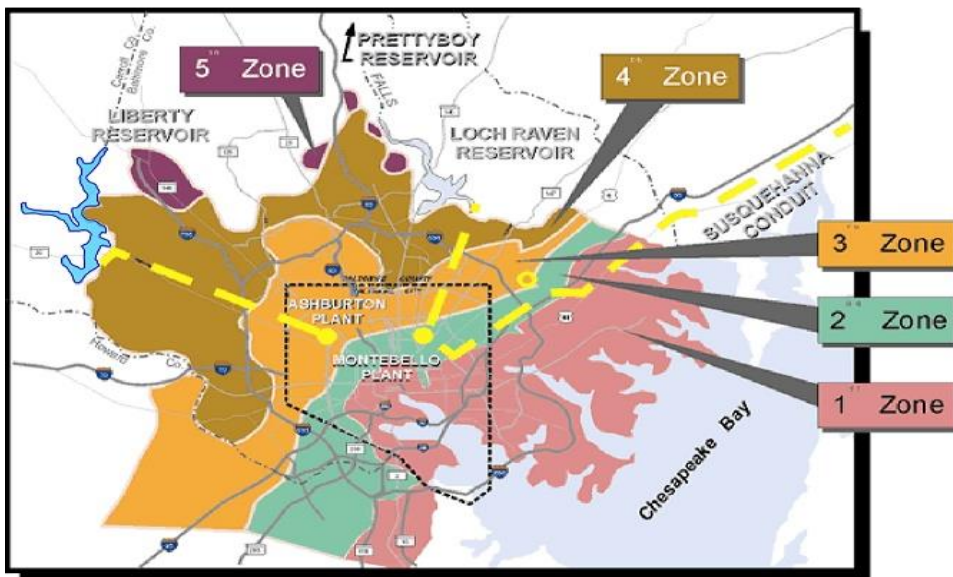
The remaining shell of Oakland Mill after dynamiting in 1954. This photo is looking downriver, with Carroll County to the right of North Branch and Baltimore County to the left. Photo is from the Historical Society of Carroll County collection.

In 1945 land clearing began. So many loggers came from Virginia and the Carolinas seeking work that the area of Deer Park and Lyons Mill where most of them boarded became known as “Little Virginia”. The city set up a sawmill with an output of 17,000 board feet per day. Dam construction began in late 1951. Upon completion, the dam was sealed and water began filling the reservoir on July 21st, 1954. Nineteen months later the reservoir was full, with the water cresting over the dam for the first time on February 6th, 1956. The reservoir is 11 miles long with 81 miles of shoreline, an area of 3,100 acres. The average water depth is 59 feet, 144 feet at the deepest spot. The dam’s capacity is 43 billion gallons of water, more than that of Pretty Boy and Loch Raven reservoirs combined. The dam was designed with no sluices or gates because it was thought that a small river like the North Branch would never reach dangerous flood levels. Instead, on either side of the dam there are spillways which direct water down a series of concrete steps to allowed for a controlled fall, an unusual design.



The Dam Under Construction

The Tunnel: Did you ever wonder how water from Liberty Reservoir gets to the city? A 12.7 mile tunnel was built well underground to the Ashburton Filtration Plant. The tunnel is cut through solid rock and water flows strictly by gravity – No Pumps. The intake to the tunnel is about a mile north of the dam. Looking south from the Liberty Road Bridge you can see the circular concrete intake structure, called a gatehouse, sitting in the middle of the water. Below is a map of the tunnel route.



The Bridges: There were four different bridges constructed across the waters of the new reservoir. Two were constructed for Liberty Road, one across the North Branch and another further west across Snowden Creek. Another bridge was constructed across the North Branch for Nicodemus Road and the fourth bridge is where Route 32 crosses Morgan Run on the way to Gamber. Below is pictured the new Liberty Road bridge, construction almost complete, alongside the old bridge across the North Branch. Originally a wooden covered bridge crossed from Baltimore to Carroll County at that spot, funded by the commissioners of both Carroll and Baltimore Counties in 1848. That bridge burned down on July 8th, 1914 and was replaced by the concrete bridge pictured below. I've seen it stated in a number of historical sources that no one has ever come across a photo of that original covered bridge, which is a shame.

