



The Planning Commission's 1960 study shows expressways flanking and crossing the Inner Harbor.

## They Stopped the Road

By LUCRETIA B. FISHER

**T**ry to imagine the present Inner Harbor ringed by wide, raised ramps of interstate highway with spaghetti-like interchanges. Imagine it spanned by a huge bridge cutting across and slicing through Federal Hill, cutting off the harbor from the rest of town. There would be no Harborplace, no famous and popular National Aquarium, no promenade or any of the waterfront pleasures enjoyed by Baltimoreans and tourists.

It's hard to imagine, but it might have happened.

In 1967 the city had other plans for the Inner Harbor and the historic old sites of Fells Point and Federal Hill. These waterfronts were in imminent danger of planned destruction by the city and Federal Highway Interstate Commission.

As long ago as 1942 the first detailed proposal was made for a controlled-access highway through the heart of the city to handle cross-town traffic. Subsequent plans through the years were tied into the newly formed interstate roads system. Finally, all proposed routes across the city had coalesced and come to rest down at the waterfront.

With the backing of Mayor Thomas D'Alesandro III, the condemnation ordinance was finally passed in May 1967 with one dissenting vote. The lone vote belonged to Thomas Ward, now a city judge, long interested in historic preservation. (The city councilmen in Fells Point had persuaded most of their constituents that they were living in a "slum" neighborhood and that they could get the best prices for their homes by selling them to the city for the highway.)

About a year earlier a small group of determined, dedicated citizens had been gathering momentum and anger over the impending loss of these two outstanding examples of early, historic Baltimore.

Federal Hill was one of the earliest public parks in the city, named in 1788 after a great public procession ended there to celebrate the ratification of the Constitution. Its commanding view made it a popular gathering place and an observatory for returning ships as they sailed up

the Patapsco River to home port.

In the 18th century much of Fells Point was given over to shipbuilding. The frigate Virginia, commissioned by the Continental Congress, was built in George Wells' shipyard at the foot of Bond Street. In 1797 the frigate Constellation was launched from David Stoddard's shipyard on nearby Harris Creek. Two elegant shipbuilders' houses remain on Fells Street: those of Captain John Steele and William Price, in whose large shipyard schooners were built for the War of 1812. Fells Point shipbuilders played an important role in that war.

The activists began their fight through Baltimore Heritage. After the condemnation ordinance passed, however, despair led the small group to start an independent organization determined to carry the fight not only to City Hall and to the state, but to the federal government as well. The first meeting, held on the second floor of a building on Thames Street, attracted 23 people who elected officers and decided on the name — the Society for the Preservation of Federal Hill, Montgomery Street and Fells Point. (Montgomery Street later was dropped for the sake of brevity).

The new society set out to use whatever means could be found to carry out its first purpose — to publicize the plight of the area. The first Fells Point Fun Festival founded the annual event which still takes place each fall.

To satisfy the requirements of the congressional National Historic Register Act, the society conducted a complete survey of all the buildings in a designated area of Fells Point and Federal Hill. This was a staggering undertaking for what was still a small group. Working rapidly under threat of the looming road, members and many volunteers, with the help of the Maryland Historic Trust, made Fells Point the first site in the state to be accepted on the federal register; Federal Hill was accepted soon after.

The society sent members to Washington to oppose organized highway interests: engineers, paving firms, auto makers, oil companies, labor unions, etc. The national highway lobby was

then the richest, busiest and most politically powerful in the United States. It had been said of this colossus it never slept and seemed to be everywhere at once.

Finally, the Society sued the federal government for funding an interstate highway through a designated historic site. While the process of litigation ground slowly forward — the case never did come to trial — Alan Boyd, secretary of transportation, announced a \$4.8 million contract for Baltimore which, he said, "may well set a pattern for designing urban highways across the nation."

The contract called for a "design concept team" with the impossible directive of weaving the expressway into the fabric of the city with the least possible damage. Their presence had the galvanizing effect of bringing together neighborhood groups opposed to the road and the eventual formation of the Movement Against Destruction (M.A.D.) — a city-wide coalition of neighborhood in the path of the expressway.

Gradually the realization came that time itself was an ally. The estimated cost of the Baltimore expressway system was mounting constantly and citizens in other cities were opposing similar interstate highways planned through the heart of their communities. San Francisco actually halted one unpopular elevated expressway in mid-air.

It is difficult to say which of the many actions taken against the road caused a change in plans. Most likely it was a combination of all of them. In any event, 11 years after its passage the City Council rescinded the condemnation ordinance and the expressways were re-routed around and under the harbor instead of through it. The results are there for everyone to see, and Harbor Place has become an example to other cities.

The Preservation Society celebrates its 25th anniversary this week. Remember: you CAN fight City Hall; you CAN stop a road.

Lucretia B. Fisher was a founding member and past president of the Society for the Preservation of Federal Hill and Fells Point.