

Interview from the preparation of

Fell's Point Out of Time



Bob Eney Interview, November 26, 2003

Kraig Greff, Interviewer

Jacquie Greff, camera

Kim Shapiro, assistant/audio

Robert Long House, 812 South Ann Street

[Bob]

I should have brought that book out of the car, because this building originally had another story on it, and it didn't look like anything like this at all. It was totally different.

[Cut for discussion of audio set-up and positioning]

When we first got this house ... a group of us bought it for \$9,000, and it was for the Preservation Society. And when we got it, it was three stories, and it had a coat of tar and little granite all over the front called "flint coat." And we were peeling it off. Every week, we'd come by, we'd peel a little more off. And then we saw, in the front of the building, we saw the hole, evidence where there were going to be poles coming out to support that pent roof. And we knew it was going to have a pent roof because it's got a little belt course just above there. I'll show you that in a minute. But when we got it, we saw these large bricks, and these are large hand-made bricks. They have alternating glazed headers, and the glaze has been badly worn off in many of them. But, in order to give the building some regularity, when they laid these bricks, they struck this deep line joint in here. When you step back and you look at it, that's what gives it ... right in here for instance, you'll see how regular it makes the bricks look. You don't even notice the irregularity of the bricks. Does that make sense to you?

[Kraig]

Yeah. Neat!

This coating that was on here, when we tried to take this off the side of the building, we were pulling off the faces of the bricks. And, so, what we had to do was stop, and Maryland Historical Trust wanted us to stucco the side of the house rather than tear up the brick, so we put a screen on there, and then put the stucco. And, someday, if they ever find out how to take that tar off, they can take the stucco off and use some solvent or something to get the brick itself clean.

[Kraig]

Any more brick stories?

[Bob]

Well, I mentioned the belt course just above that pent roof. And you see that, underneath the windowsills up there. Can you see that row of three bricks underneath the windowsills up there? That's a belt course, and when it's at the windowsill level, you know, it's not supposed to be at the windowsill level. It's supposed to be half-way between the windows and the upstairs and downstairs. But when it's up high like that, it indicates that there was a pent roof on the building, and this is a pent roof. It's not typical of Baltimore ... more north of here, up in Cecil County and Pennsylvania, that kind of area.

[Cut]

[Kraig]

Any more brick stories? Any more things about this house?

[Bob]

Did I tell you that the house was built in 1764? And when we got the house, we knew it was an old house. We didn't know how old, exactly. We didn't know much about it. We had to do a lot of research on it. And then we found out the date of the house, and then we found out the man who owned it, Robert Long, had actually done something in the Revolutionary War. He was Governor Simms Lee, who was Governor of Maryland at the time. He authorized him to go ...

[Cut - change positions.]

Governor Simms Lee, at the time during the Revolutionary War, authorized this man, Robert Long, the owner here, to commandeer any wagons he needed at all in the state to take grain up to New Jersey to Washington's troops, because they were starving. And, the rivers were frozen, they couldn't get through. And so Robert Long commandeered people's wagons and people's grain and whatnot, took it up. And then, after the War, we found out that Robert Long went back to the State's Assembly like politicians today, time and time again, telling them how much of his own money he spent doing this and how he needed to get repaid ... Whatever ...

[Kraig]

So, Robert Long was just some kind of a crook. So, here it is, the Robert Long House... Well, there it is.

[Bob]

Right. Well, he was just an ordinary guy, and he and General Mordecai Gist ... [Question if camera was on.] Well, Mordecai Gist was the general in charge of the troops here. But after the end of the war, all the land that had been taken and property that had been seized of the Tories, there were Tories here, and so their property had been seized. It was owned by the state. And it was to be sold in a democratized method. And, so they did. They sold it all off. There was a man named Ebenezer Mackey, who had bought Robert Long's warehouse, which is on the water. [Kraig comment about unusual name.] Ebenezer Mackey, his property had been taken, and Robert Long went and bought it for a little bit of money. And, what they wanted, they wanted everybody to have a chance to get at this Tory property, but of all the Tory properties taken in Baltimore, there were

twelve buyers who got it all. And Robert Long and General Mordecai Gist, they got about a ... a staggering number of thousands of pounds worth of property that they bought because they were right there at the right time. It wasn't a very good process.

[Kraig]

So they wound up becoming wealthy over this whole deal.

[Bob]

The made out like crazy, right. [Laughs]

[01:07:24:17]

[Kraig]

Give me a little bit of your background. You know so much about this stuff. Historian? Architect? What's the deal here. I've laid some brick before, but I didn't know ... You seem to know everything about the brick, and all the proper terminology.

[Bob]

I've always been interested. That's why I moved to Fells Point.

[Kraig]

From where?

[Bob]

From New York in 1967. I moved down, and when I got here, I wanted to buy an old house in Fells Point. I knew it was an area down here. But when I got down here, they were going to build an expressway through here. From Thames Street down there up to Lancaster Street, they were getting ready to condemn everything through here for I-83, I-95, and I-70. All three were going to come right through here. It'd have been sixteen lanes, maybe even double-deck. So, we got a group together to try to fight the road.

[Kraig]

How many people in the initial group?

[Bob]

The Preservation Society, there were thirty of us. And so we made them all Board members, and that's how we started out. And, within a year, we had almost five hundred people behind us. It was a good start. Then, because the National Register was a new thing, at the time it was coming, it hadn't started yet. That looked like it might have some promise. So, we got a lawyer. We went out looking for a lawyer. And at that time, William Donald Shaffer was the President of the City Council. And he was running for mayor. And so his treasurer was Norman Ramsey who was the head of Semmes, Bowen and Semmes, a very prestigious law firm downtown. And we were able to get Norman Ramsey to be our attorney and represent us, because we had gotten onto the National Register. We were the first group in Maryland to get a designation ... to get Fells Point designated as

an Historic District on the National Register. And, what that said was, no Federal money could be used to destroy anything on the National Register without the consent of the President's Advisory Commission on Historic Preservation. And so what we had to do then was woo all of those people, there were eight of them, on the President's Advisory Commission. We learned who they were, and we went and we got them, and we brought them over to Fells Point, and we'd take them to Haussner's for dinner, we'd take them all around. We did all this stuff.

[Cut - discussion that we need to get these details during inside interview.]

Double House at 912 & 914 Fell Street

[01:10:30:10]

[Bob]

These two houses are typical of the houses you'll find in every block in Fells Point. Because, they didn't build row houses, but they built double houses. The owner built one for himself and he rented the other one. And that happened in almost every block in Fells Point. You'll find at least one set of double houses. And, in this case, one house was more elaborate than the other house on the inside, and that would have been the owner's house. Here you can see one that still has the paint and all the stuff and not the old windows, and this one has been pretty much brought back to what it looked like originally with the proper windows.

[Kraig]

Which one was the owner's house?

[Bob]

That one was.

[Kraig]

That was the owner's house?

[Bob]

That was the owner's house. And it had ... because they're in the back yard now ... it had mantelpiece with Welford ornaments on it, that's a Philadelphia company that manufactured the mantelpieces that had the Greek figures and things? Unfortunately most people, because it had a lot of paint on it, just ripped that stuff out threw it away. And this mantelpiece is in that back yard. But, it had more elaborate woodwork. And the wood trim in these houses varies from room to room. Like the front room downstairs is the elaborate room. And that would have the most ornate fireplace and the most ornate chair rail, where the dining room would be a little bit like that, but upstairs would be much simpler and plain. Now, when you go down the street, when we talk about the Captain Steele house later, that's the big three-and-a-half story house, and every room in that house ... and that house retained all of its woodwork up until today ... and the woodwork gets more and more elaborate as you go from room to room on the first floor. But the main room in the larger houses like that one and the Norris House up the street, the main room is on the second floor front, because those houses are about 28 feet wide, 25, 28 feet wide, and so that big room on the second floor is usually the drawing room of the house, and they lived much differently than the

people who lived in the smaller houses.

[Cut]

Now, look over there and see that pent roof, that chimney pent between the two... You see that house down the street with the attic window? Look above it and you'll see the penthouse between the chimneys. And on the other side, there's another penthouse for the other house. That's a double house there.

[Camera moves first to capture Robert Long House, which is not the house he was referring to.]

If that doesn't work I've got a good drawing of a pent roof... It's called a chimney pent.

[Camera moves to correct house with pent roof nearby.]

Look up between them and you'll see a little shack between the chimneys over there. That's the penthouse, and you got a stairway on the inside that goes up to that and you come out. There's this house over here, the Captain Steele house, the big one, that has one with a perfect ladder on the inside, a stairway on the inside.

1606 & 1608 Shakespeare St.

[01:14:29;23]

[Bob]

Now, this pair of houses, identical to the pair that we saw earlier, pretty much the same thing. They were built in 1795. This one was occupied by William Furlong, and we're not sure occupied this one. Furlong was a captain of a vessel, and he also was out at Fort McHenry in the bombardment of Fort McHenry. Arnold Capute, who did this house, did painstaking research on the house. And the house had not been damaged in many ways. And you'll notice the cornice up there, from the inside, in the cornice, when Arnold cleaned out the attic, he found many artifacts and a map of New York state, 1795. He found shoe buckles, a pair of shoe buckles, he found pieces of painted floor cloth... It was fantastic! The house has most of its woodwork intact in it. Arnold has done a great job restoring it. This one has been through all kinds of things. It's the same brick facade, but they've altered the windows in the late nineteenth century and they raised the roof in the late nineteenth century. It's got a late nineteenth century cornice on the top. And that happened when all of the immigrants were coming in and they were trying to fill the house with as many people as possible and make the house as big as possible. Arnold's house had never been altered on the inside.

[Cut]

That house, next to Arnold's, that had another floor added to it, which has been removed and the owner brought it back to a two-and-a-half story house.

1604 Shakespeare St.

[01:16:41:04 - mic with wind muff shows on screen – this house only]

[Bob]

This house also had another floor added to it, and when the city sold all these houses off, these people had the alternative of restoring it as a three-story house or bringing it back to a two-story house. And they chose to bring it back to a two-story house. It has more character. Again, it's a house of about 1790-1792.

1600 Shakespeare St.

[01:17:18:11]

[Bob]

... The fireplace in the kitchen there is phenomenal. I can stand up in the opening.. It's eight feet wide. It has an oven in the back of the fireplace, and the oven actually at one time was where this alley way is, and the foundation is still partly in the basement of this house for that oven.

[Kraig]

What is the significance of this house here?

[Bob]

This was the kitchen building to the Fell family farm, which could possible be from the 1730's... It's quite a wonderful house. It has windows in this end on the upstairs, on the third floor. It's got windows on this end that look eastward.

[Cut. Change position slightly.]

This house had one room on the second floor, no fireplace. It obviously was for slaves or servants, but it had no fireplace in it, and it was just one big room with a wooden wall kind of dividing it down the middle. And on the first floor again, it was one big room with this enormous fireplace in this end. It's a wonderful fireplace, you have to see it!

And, Ann Fell, when she was selling off the properties, Ann Fell sold the house in the very beginning ... She sold the house in 1771 as she was starting to lay off the property.

[Cut]

Ann Fell started selling off the town and as she began ... her husband died, so she had to really work hard, because she had laid out this thing as a town, and she was selling it herself, so she became the Jim Rouse of her day, and she really did work. She was a dynamo, because people in Baltimore Town hated Fells Point competing with them. But she was dynamo. She went ahead and sold this town off, and in ten years she did. But one of the first properties that she sold was the kitchen building. And she sold it to a man as a building. Not as a lot, she sold it as a building, which would indicate that it was here well before any offering. And she sold it to a guy from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and people came in from all over to buy this stuff.

[Kraig]

You talk about the "kitchen building," what does that mean?

[Bob]

The kitchen building was where, for this farm, was where they cooked.

[Kraig]

So Fells Point was actually a farm?

[Bob]

Oh, it was definitely a farm. And we think that that was his house, and the next few buildings down the street there, they were all sold as a group, and they were sold as the Fell Mansion. And they were sold, and that was about 1794. They were sold off. And we have the newspaper ad for that, the whole thing.

[Kraig]

So this whole area was where William Fell had all his little buildings.

[Bob]

Right. This was William Fell's farm. It was called Fells Prospect. And when he died, he died in '46, and when he died, his son...

[Action pauses for loud truck and siren noise. Bob laughs and shakes.]

[Jacquie]

I'm gonna have out takes on this. [Car alarm goes off.]

[Bob]

While we are standing here waiting, look at the three-story building and look above the windows. I mean you'll see it everywhere. When you look and you're aware of it, you'll see it. You see what happens up there? This is Flemish bond brick up to the top of the windows on the second floor, and from there on up it's just running bond. You see that?

[Jacquie]

Yeah, it's different.

[Bob]

It happens all over Fells Point. But you're not aware of it.

[Kraig]

I am now. I think I'll always be aware of it from now on, Bob. Tell me about ... this was a farm, that whole thing, because that's very interesting.

[Bob]

When we're done here, I prepared a map for the kids at St. Stan's School. And I showed it ... oversimplified ... I showed Fells Point with the farm, and told them that this was William Fell's farm. When he started selling it out as a town, they called it Fell's Point. I'll show you that when we're done here.

[Kraig]

So it became Fell's Point once she started selling the whole thing off.

[Bob]

Well, his son ... William Fell died in '46, and his son Edward Fell inherited it. Edward Fell married his mother's niece, Ann Bond. ... All the people coming to Baltimore Town couldn't get up into the harbor. The harbor was silted up., and you couldn't dock there. But right here, Fell had deep water, right up to the land. And so everybody wanted to do something with this property. So he decided that he would capitalize on this, Edward did, and lay it out into a town, so they put it into a town. Ann's father, John Bond, was their attorney. And he laid it out. We have all the land records, ads and everything, for selling it off as a town.

As soon as they started selling it off, Edward Fell died. And Ann became the dynamo who pushed it. And I mean she was a tiger, and she was good, because she had to fight all those people in downtown Baltimore, and she was successful. Because her father, as her attorney, he told those people, "we can prove everything that Ann says is correct," and she did.

Ann, then, wanted to get another husband. So, when she looks around, she looks around for a husband. Now, she's a very intelligent woman. So she looked around all over the area, and over in Harford County she found Mr. Giles. Mr. Giles owned about half of Harford County, so she married him. When she did, she went into it with a pre-nuptial agreement ... because she had her children ... she had some daughters and a son, and he had some children. So, she went into a pre-nuptial agreement that said, anything that she goes into this marriage with does not go to any of his heirs. It goes to her children. And he agreed to that. And, as it turns out, most of his children passed on before all this happened, and so her kids got everything, the Harford County and Baltimore. She was a very clever woman.

1609 Shakespeare St.

[01:26:17:12]

[Bob]

This little house behind the telephone pole there... I worked on that house with James Roland, the historical architect from Harford County. And we worked the entire day, and the house just proved to be so fantastic, because it was built completely out of square. It looked like it had been built by rank amateurs. It was a Quaker plan, one room above another. William Fell had been a Quaker. And the house had some really strange early archaic things in it that you wouldn't have found in a late eighteenth century house, so it was a very early eighteenth century house. And we figure since it was part of the Fell Mansion, when at the end, it probably ... the house had just grown and grown

and grown, and that it was William Fell's house perhaps.

[Jacquie]

Is that the one right next to the graveyard you're talking about, or the one down from it?

[Bob]

It's the one with the pent roof, the little pent roof across the front.

[Cut while car parks]

... crumbling ... the front wall practically fell into powder. And so, it's got a new front. This side wall is probably original ... has some of the original framing on the structure, on the second floor ceiling, and a little bit of the first floor ceiling. But it's largely a rebuilt house. That belongs to Stelios.

1603 & 1605 Shakespeare, "Half House"

[Bob]

The pair of houses here was built in 1792. But they're not a complete pair, they were only the fronts. They didn't have enough money, apparently, to build a two-room deep house. So they built the front half, and you'll see how far it went back, now covered with stucco, that front wall was stuccoed. About 1818, they built the back on this house. We don't know about the other one, when it went on, but this was 1818 when this was added on to the back of the house.

Back to 1609 Shakespeare St.

[01:28:47:22]

[Kraig]

Now which one of these houses is the house you think that William Fell was...

[Bob]

This one. [Pointing to Stelios' house.]

[Kraig]

Right there?

[Bob]

This one, yeah. This house is only eighteen feet deep.

[Kraig]

And the back there is all added on.

[Bob]

Oh, everything is added on. But, this building, when we were working on it, it's exactly eighteen feet by eighteen feet nine on this side and eighteen feet on that side. So, it's built out of square...

[Kraig]

You mentioned that William Fell was a Quaker, why was it built out of square? Was it a religious thing?

[Bob]

No, no, no, no. It was because they weren't builders. He was in communication with all the Quakers up in Cecil County, all around. He got all over the place with the Quakers. And the Quakers all helped one another. All through Cecil County you'll find this little house, once, then sometimes double, the same little house hooked together. But it was his close association with the Quakers in the very beginning. Now he got away from that because he wasn't a good Quaker necessarily...

[Kim]

Is there a Quaker meeting house down here?

[Bob]

Oh, the meeting house is still over there, but it wasn't the one that he went to, though. But there is a meeting house over, right off of Aisquith Street there, between Baltimore and Fayette Street, the Quaker meeting house there. It's used for something else now.

[Kraig]

So, basically, if this was the big mansion and everything, how far did his property actually extend? He just lived in this little bitty house?

[Bob]

No, no, no. This would have been the first house, and then it grew. And he added on and on and on. We have an ad from 1794 of selling off the Fell Mansion. Then they called it the Mansion. It goes back to the Horse You Came In On and up here and over here. And, when I was doing the work on the city houses that I had to do, we went through ... Arnold Capute worked with me, and we went through the basements of some of these buildings and we found the fireplaces, huge fireplaces in the basement ... down the street here. And, as a matter of fact, the little stucco houses, do you see down there? They have a very unusual front on them. The bricks were strange. They were Flemish bond, but they were like, not normal. They were older bricks. So rather than alter it and try to do something with it, we told them that they had to stucco the front of the houses then, maybe, figure out what was really there.

[Kraig]

Now, that's Flemish bond there. Is that a fake Flemish bond?

[Bob]

It's real Flemish bond.

[Kraig]

Flemish bond is the design?

[Bob]

Yeah. That's a half brick and a whole brick. And that's for the front of houses.

[Kraig]

But you said this was rebuilt. This is not the original front to this house.

[Bob]

No. This front was in such bad condition, that we photographed what was there, and then took it down and rebuilt this.

[Cut - discussion of purchase price of house]

[Jacquie]

You were answering Kim's question about the house being concave.

[Bob]

The house was in such bad shape, that ... this wall had to be propped up while this one was taken down, just to keep it from caving in. And, once it was done, everything was reinforced from the inside. It was in miserable shape. It should have been, probably, demolished and then rebuilt. But, then, the house was there, so you did that.

1605, 1607 & 1609 Lancaster St.

[01:33:19:00 - 2nd tape]

[Kraig]

So Bob, show me the difference between the bricks there, and ... tell me a little bit about the history of the house.

[Bob]

Well, the facade has been replaced. [Referring to 1607] It was replaced some time between, let's say, 1865 and 1875, around that era. Because the narrow joint, the very narrow mortar joint, was in very high style then. Down the street, the big house on the corner ... about the same vintage. And that has a date stone on it -- I think that's about 1892, something like that.

[Kraig]

So this house could be older than 1865?

[Bob]

Oh, the house inside could. I'm talking about the facade now. I've never been inside, so I can't determine anything, but that's when the facade was changed.

This one [pointing to 1609] is about the same vintage but maybe just a little bit later. It gets more ornate with all of that molded brick. This one could be as late as 1890.

[Kraig]

And what about the one right here? [Referring to 1605]

[Bob]

That's running bond, and it's probably around 1830. Flemish bond stops around 1830. For some reason, they don't lay it in Flemish bond any more. They just lay it in running bond. And that's running bond. They thought that that was pretty modern. But again, it would be hard to determine without looking at the interior to see if the interior is contemporary with that. The dormer window up there has been replaced, so I can't tell.

1611 Lancaster St.

[01:35:43:08]

[Bob]

This to me has always been a charmer because of its tiny scale ... with a cut stone cornice. No other house in all of Fells Point has a cut stone cornice. And I don't think any early little house in all of early Baltimore had a cut stone cornice. As well as the cut stone lintels over these windows. So, clearly you can see that ... this third floor was added some time after the 1870's, 1880's..

[Kraig]

So this house is dated about what?

[Bob]

This house would be about 1790. And, when you look in the side alley-way, you see that this house is built with ballast brick, that's those little thin bricks -- "bastard bricks" they were called, because they didn't match ... you couldn't have laid a facade with them because they wouldn't ... they're not thick enough ... you can't really lay them right.

Can we go upstairs to the 3rd floor and see them?

[Break - next scene is in upstairs 3rd floor bedroom looking at wall]

[Jacquie]

Now, go ahead and tell me about this wall.

[Bob]

All right. Well, the main body of this house, that is, the side and the back, is built out of this bastard brick that was dumped by the shippers on the dock. When they sailed out, they used to just throw them in the water. But then the town said, if you threw your ballast brick in the water, you'd be fined and you'd never be allowed back in port again. So then, they started stacking them on the dock and people would come and take them and use them for gardens, anything. But here, this guy actually built the main body of this house out of these little skinny bricks. And you can see they're totally not what you would normally have for bricks. And you couldn't really tie them in to other

bricks. Here you see all kinds of rubble brick, all sizes and whatnot. Here is the roof line coming down ... Do you see that?

[Jacquie]

I can't see it on the camera... [briefly discuss where camera stops]

[Bob]

That's the roof line coming down there, of the original house.

[Kraig]

And this dates to what time?

[Bob]

This house [pointing to roof line] from here down, is probably 1790, 1785-95, somewhere in there. But this [pointing to bricks above roof line] up here, this is ... when they raised the roof, and put the Victorian cornice on, this is late 18th century, 19th century, late 19th century, say 1870, '80, something like that.

[Kim]

But they still used that small brick for both parts?

[Bob]

Well, but this is just because they probably had some left over from around the edges because ... [Kraig comment, can't understand] These are all uniform little brick down here, but up in here, it's all mixed up stuff. You get some fatter ones and whatever.

[Kraig]

What was the consistency of the mortar? I noticed on our house, somebody said it was oyster shell. What's the mortar there?

[Bob]

[Looks closely at bricks] Well, now here you can see pieces of the oyster shell in the mortar here. You can see little flecks of the oyster shell in it. [Picks off piece. Camera focus moves in and out.]

The other thing that you can see a lot of times in the plaster ... have you taken any plaster off in your house?

[Jacquie]

Our house was totally redone. I think the roof was caved in after the City owned it for a while.

[Bob]

If you get in one of the houses where you're taking the plaster off, and it's an old house, when you break it off from the lathe, you'll see great swirls of cow hair ... you have on the hip of the cow the ...

[Jacquie]

Is it cow hair or horse hair?

[Bob]

Cow hair. Red cow hair.

[Jacquie]

Somebody told me that was horse hair.

[Bob]

No. Horse hair is long. They didn't use long. They used cow hair.

[Kraig]

But what do they do with it? Is that part of the plaster?

[Bob]

Yeah, you put that in the plaster and that holds the plaster together. Like, when you're working on the ceiling and you're pulling a piece of it down. And a piece falls a little bit and you look at it and you see all that hair in there. That's the cow hair holding it.

[Jacquie]

That Roland Reed House has some hair in the wall. But they were calling it horse hair.