

# Fell's Point Out of Time



## Bob Keith Interview, November 17, 2003

[Interviewer, Chris Huntington & Jacquie Greff]

[Bob]

I'm Bob Keith, and I've lived in Fell's Point since the mid 1980's. And by profession, I've always all my life been a newspaper/magazine person – editing and writing, and I do have a couple of books that I've authored.

[Chris]

What magazines did you work for / work with?

[Bob]

Well, I spent a lot of time in Washington, DC, actually, created one magazine called Afro Report for the African-American Institute that is still in publication, which is pretty good for any magazine to be in publication after 40 or 50 years. Also was news editor for the Congressional Quarterly Service in Washington and then went over to the Los Angeles Times Washington Post News Service and was there for 15 years or so. So it's been a range of stuff – a lot of different fields and interests.

[Chris]

Ok, will you start by talking about the demolition of historic buildings in the '80's and the '90's here in Fell's Point?

[Bob]

Well, I came to Fell's Point, the place was ... just a lot of change that took place really in the 1980's and it really was set-backs. I know we'd won the road fight, but we had a lot more historic buildings here than we do now, particularly over here where I am on Bond Street and on the west side. We had the original Terminal Warehouse down at the foot of the street and just down from that was what we called the "zig-zag building", Miller's Wharf, and there was a Ruckert Terminal. We had ... over west of Caroline Street we had this fantastic lumber company, Atlantic Lumber. There was a little oil company over there, too. We had Lacy Foundry, Graphlin Bag.... A number of these buildings had a lot of potential to be part of a renovated Fell's Point where you save the historic character but then you put all kinds of housing and shops and so forth, and it makes it very exciting. Like Omaha, Nebraska, of all places, had this wonderful warehouse district, and one person basically owned it, and they've done a wonderful job of preserving. And Fell's Point ... we lost a lot of opportunities back then and for various reasons. One was that the developers began to come in right then and they looked at some of these buildings and they decided they were small and really not significant, and so they made some deals as to which ones they would save and which ones

they would tear down. Actually, one of the deals was to save the Terminal Warehouse and to save the Miller's Terminal Building, and of course they're not there any more....

Michael Silver was a developer who working with Mayor Shaffer brought up a lot of the property over on this side. He did save some of what was considered the really important historic buildings. In fact, they conducted a number of archeological digs and uncovered a lot of the old foundations and some of the other buildings.... But then things began to happen... Mayor Schmoke came in and there was a lot of pressure to develop ... people wanted to develop various parts of Fell's Point. And maybe they didn't want to do it right then, but they wanted to stake out their development rights. And the Mayor commissioned a plan, then, for Fell's Point which is called the Notter Plan (N O T T E R I believe it was). That's really the second plan – there was a Lou Sauer plan before that. And these plans were to kind of give a professional planner's guidelines for the development, but the plans ... there's plans, but then there's politics. And everyone ... even then, Fell's Point was quite attractive to developers but everyone wanted to push it just a little bit farther for their own project, and you do that cumulatively and you have pressure for over-development. And at that time, the Mayor commissioned a plan but then he didn't really follow it ... we had kind of a weak City Council ... we had (this is terrible to say) "the felon and the bigot and the nincompoop." People would know exactly who I was talking about – it was not a high-quality representation City Council. So, with all of that, that was when the developers went to City Council with their plans, the community felt that a lot of them were really pushing the envelop a lot ... if they all happened, then you'd have a whole lot of problem in Fell's Point with traffic and parking ... you would kill the goose. This is a wonderful potential place for a very special community in Baltimore, and it still is, but we have to keep fighting to save it, to protect it from over-development.

It started then, but there were other things that happened back in the '80's. One thing was that we had a series of fires. Henderson's Wharf was gutted by a fire right when it was in the midst of development. Over here on the west side, we had a terrible fire in 1988. One evening, I think I was over in some other part of town and looked over and saw the flames. Like everybody else, we came rushing back to the area to see what was going on. This wonderful lumber company, the Atlantic Lumber, went up in flames with a lot of great wood, seasoned, wonderful, the kind of wood that you just can't find in lumber yards any more... And then right near it was the little Apex Oil Company – as the drums became heated up, they became explosive and just shot up in the air like mortars. And we were watching these big drums go up in the air. And the fire spread to the Lacy Foundry buildings and I think that was the time when the Graphlin Bag on the waterfront. So that one fire ... and I know there were investigations for arson, and I don't know that they ever pinned it down to anybody, but it was a major, to me, a major loss of potential, of really having something so special in this part of Fell's Point.

Another problem was that some of the people who bought the properties back then ... it did look kind of promising, but then the market kind of fell apart. Now, with Constellation Properties, Christian Poindexter ran their property real estate office back then – he later became head of the company and Chairman and so forth.... There was something about Constellation, the way their real estate people worked that anything, gains that they might have, since it's a regulated monopoly, the real estate portion was not regulated, so any gains they had would go directly to the stockholders and any losses they had would also go to the stockholders. The last thing they wanted to do was to show losses, and so they didn't really want to sell the properties at a loss, but they didn't want to

develop them either. In the end, they decided that the market would be better if they tore them down, and then people could see the sight and the waterfront and so forth. So we lost some great buildings just through Constellation's inability to really move – they had to set on for about ten years, including the Terminal Warehouse and then what we called the “zig-zag building”...

So all of those combined together really kind of put us back. We ended up with a lot of empty land down here. Of course, when the Chrome Plant went out of business, that brought more empty land.

When I first came here, the trains went right by the house here on Bond Street going to the Chrome Plant. Probably if I'd known what was in them, I wouldn't have found them so charming, but I certainly did at that time. But since then, there has been a long period, and we're finally coming out of that period, and I think some good things are happening, but they're not quite the kind of things that would have happened if they were really based on these wonderful old historical buildings that were here before and that we've lost.

[Chris]

A lot of the historic buildings that we've lost seem to be industrial buildings...

[Bob]

Well, a lot of the buildings that we lost during that period were built as industrial buildings, but of course we've seen now that in Baltimore what kind of great adaptive reuse you can make of formerly industrial buildings. Like Tindeco down on the waterfront – it used to be the biggest tin can company in the world, and now it's residences and right next, Canton Cove, this wonderful condos, and the same thing here. So, the kind of structure, the hull of the building is the basis but then it would have the look and feel of old Fell's Point. When you have to build from the ground up, I guess it's good architecture that's going in now, and you know it's compatible but it's not Fell's Point.

[Chris]

How would you compare the Inner Harbor to Fell's Point? I guess similar things have happened in the Inner Harbor...

[Bob]

Well, all the time I've been here, there's been kind of – I don't know if it's a rivalry – but certainly Fell's Point has maintained its independence from the Inner Harbor. I don't know if Fell's Point was appreciated quite as much in the days when I first came here as it is now, but there wasn't as much here. Of course, the independence goes way back to the beginning ... just across the street from me when the founding fathers of Fell's Point met at the London Coffee House and decided whether to join Baltimore City. And I guess they were correct in doing so, but I think Fell's Point would actually, if it had just stayed a separate incorporated city, things might be different. Even now, while it seems kind of the engine of Baltimore but it's very capable of sustaining itself and was then. I think that the kind of growth that we're having now, a lot of it now is very much residential ... the waterfront seems like a great place to come and live....

[Chris]

What about the Recreational Pier debate?

[Bob]

One of the things that's happening today as we reconstruct Fell's Point is the Recreational Pier has really come before us as something that we have now an opportunity to do something with – we had before, but I think we were kind of looking to the future with Rec Pier. And then the Homicide people came along and tied it up for four years or more with a very wonderful ... it was so exciting to be here when they were here. It put itself and Fell's Point on the map and I don't think in a negative way, even though it was dealing with homicides. So after that, I know the city just didn't do anything with it and decided it needed to be reinforced... So there's some real opportunity here to create something in Recreation Pier that has a really ... helps give Fell's Point ... helps preserve a spot on its maritime character. That's certainly the kind of use it should have. Something that that reflects the real maritime personality of Fell's Point.

[Chris]

Maybe we could talk a little about Fell's Point and some real special memories you have...

[Bob]

Why don't you ask the question you asked before ... Rec Pier?

[Chris]

More about the Pier? Yeah, your feelings on what you think should be done with the Pier...

[Bob]

There's a lot of good ideas for Rec Pier that have come along. I personally think that some kind of small, effective maritime museum should be part of the picture. Maryland Historical Society has made a good beginning with a museum on Thames Street now that covers just the age of sail. We might call it the age of when Fell's Point provoked the British into the War of 1812 with our ships and then, again, with our ships we defeated the British and drove them away. And that's kind of what is covered, but then so much has happened since then in the maritime history of Fell's Point and Baltimore in ship-building and, of course, after that was when the big paddle-wheeled steamers came along. Baltimore was the paddle-wheel steamer hub of the Chesapeake Bay for a hundred years. And we were the focal point for so much.... And that really needs to be captured in maritime museum ... there is none in Fell's Point or in Baltimore. There was a nice museum in the lower part of the Historical Society on Monument Street, but that's been pretty much dismantled and put in storage in connection with their major, wonderful expansion... So the time has come, I think, and there are wonderful opportunities there with Rec Pier to incorporate a really well-done maritime museum, not just a bunch of models and pictures, but to really tell the story in exciting ways. Also, in a modern museum, you have things for kids and the whole family... Any museum experience should be a family experience. And the opportunity is there now with Rec Pier. So that's what I feel about that.

[Chris]

Ok, so tell me some good stories ....

[Bob]

No matter how long you've been here, you keep finding surprises in these old houses. Right across on Bond Street a little bit to the south, Dorothy Pabst, who just moved out ... her family's been here for years ... they had ... it wasn't the Pabst Brewing Company of Milwaukee, but it was the Pabst name, they had Pabst Beer... And as I understand, probably some of the tubs and whatever you do with brewing are still there in the basement. Then just up here, I think it may be the building that's been incorporated into the Black Olive that was one of our first newspapers in Baltimore was in that building, the Journal (I forget the name). Of course, a lot of people just had things in their own houses – we still do that – a lot of us have different kinds of small businesses and activities that we do in our own houses...

[Chris]

So you see less and less of that going on? You figure it has to do with the modernization of Fell's Point?

[Bob]

Well I don't think people are coming in here now to have shops in their houses. People coming in here now ... anybody that can pay the rents or prices to live here have got to have a real job elsewhere and they're just coming here to stay and spend the nights and weekends and so forth, but they're commuting to some job where they get their money to pay for their waterfront view.

[Jacquie]

How do you feel about that? How do you feel about the changes that are happening in the neighborhood?

[Bob]

The neighborhood has changed since I've lived here.... Some of the people that have been here for a long time, one by one they leave one way or another. There's a lot of young people coming in, and that's very exciting, really. It's too bad we don't have schools and recreational places that would attract people with their families. But I think there's a lot of vitality in having young people coming in. Of course, young people don't have the institutional knowledge and background so we have to hope that they will come to respect what Fell's Point is. That we can all be together in keeping it the great place that we all think it is.

[Chris]

I remember that fire you were talking about with the oil drums. I used to live on Aliceanna Street.

[Bob]

Oh, that was something. There was another fire at Terminal Warehouse, the pier. I can't remember exactly when that was, but that didn't really have any ... I mean, it ruined the pier, but the pier was abandoned anyway and it didn't really have any significant impact, but this other fire sure did.

[Chris]

What do you think about these big parking garages that they're putting up? All of a sudden, you see these big five-level parking garages going up...

[Bob]

Parking garages are a challenge because the bigger they are, the uglier they are, but also, the bigger they are, the more capacity they have. The thing that drives us all nuts is trying to park on our own streets. We don't have this all worked out yet, and I don't know that we ever will completely. We've got the garages there, but they haven't really been integrated into the whole parking management for Fell's Point where there's really full utilization of those garages in a way that's not too expensive for people to go into, but at the same time they help keep the streets clear. I think retail business is hurt by the street parking probably more than retailers even realize. If they did realize it, they'd get themselves and their employees off those streets and into the garages so that their customers could come down. Because there's this feeling, always has been for so long that you don't want to go to Fell's Point to buy something because you can't park there. We've got to overcome that. We have now with the parking garages a new parking authority downtown to manage things, you do now have the opportunity to really develop some parking plan that really utilizes everything and makes this more friendly for outsiders to feel they can come here and that they will be able to find a place to park.

[Chris]

So you don't find that the retail business in Fell's Point is a negative towards the residential standpoint of living down here...

[Bob]

One of the great things about living in Fell's Point is it's such a mix of things ... of course, the restaurants, we have the best restaurants ... every ethnic group that you can think of, there's a restaurant here ... Slavic or Japanese or Chinese or French or Italian or Greek ... almost anything. That's true also with the shops ... there's this wonderful Brassworks down here. It's just great to have just outside your door within an easy walk, you can go to places where ... It seems to me if you're competing the way you have to, if you have a real specialty like the Brassworks – everybody knows that if you need brass, you go there first – it's like having a model train store down under the viaduct – terrible location but ... So, I think I'd like to see more specialty shops that are the best in town. Certainly it's wonderful having them all here. Of course, the restaurant ... I can't walk more than half a block down to Duda's on the corner ... they have the best soup on the East Coast, I think sometimes. So we have a great mix, a great opportunity to go places and enjoy yourself.

[Chris]

Now, along with the good food and the restaurants you've enjoyed so much, there comes quite the weekend nightlife down here. Do you think that's a negative or a positive? You have a lot of college kids and stuff on the streets....

[Bob]

Well, night life has sure gone through a lot of changes since I came here – it was terrible at that time, when I first came. It's kind of eased up now, I hate to say it, but with the movement downtown to Market Place and with the Power Plant Live ... I think that's taken some of the more difficult kids, kids that are really too young to drink.... It seems to me that the problem of the Friday and Saturday nights from the resident point of view is easing, but I still think it's interesting for people to come here and so I think it's a problem we're just kind of working our way through.

[Jacquie]

What are your favorite parts of Fell's Point, aside from the thing's you've already mentioned?

[Bob]

Fell's Point attracted me from the beginning. Of course, the waterfront. I grew up in Michigan and spent a lot of time on the Detroit river waterfront with my parents. I worked on Great Lakes freighters, and the commercial waterfront is so exciting here in Baltimore because it's close in ... you look across from the foot of Bond Street and there's always a smokestack of a sugar boat that's come up from South America or some place unloading the Domino sugar.... Just to look out, to be able to see the big ships ... that's really to me the most exciting part of Fell's Point. You always get surprised when you go by Broadway Pier – there might be some huge passenger ship that's come in. Just this last week, there was a three-masted ship out of some movie. Well, it is out of some movie, it's the Bounty, made for a movie ... and the place that they love to tie up is Fell's Point because there is so much fun for them to dock here, and for the crews, they've got something to do.... The tall ships is a very major attraction to Fell's Point...

[Jacquie]

What's your least favorite part of Fell's Point?

[Bob]

You've got the waterfront, but then as you work your way up Broadway, it kind of changes kind of quickly and as you get north of maybe Bank Street, it's getting really interesting now, with the Latino influx, and a lot of nice new-looking restaurants. There's kind of this little area, I guess around Eastern Avenue, that kind of looks like it's left over from the 1940's or 50's or 60's. I just hope that kind of evolves into something a little more attractive to everybody.

[Jacquie]

If you had a magic wand and could wave it and one thing would change, what would it be?

[Bob]

Well, George Bush would go out of office .... [Laughter]

[Jacquie]

Not that relevant to Fell's Point... I could put it in anyway.

[Bob]

I'm at a loss. If I had just one thing....

[Jacquie]

Looking at all the things that you've done in Fell's Point, what do you think is the biggest contribution you've made personally – the thing you're most proud of having been involved with? What's the best thing that you've worked on or contributed to or done?

[Bob]

One thing, when you come here, you do tend to get active if you're not going to work every day, 9 to 5 in particular. There's so many causes.... I've gotten involved in a lot of them. Many of them have been totally lost causes and it's a waste of time, I mean like fighting the height of the motel and some other things. I remember I had something to do with getting the permit parking program in here, which is so controversial. I thought the homeowners were going to lose it because I think the City Council people were beginning to lose their nerve on it, so I got involved in that. And kind of independently, I think kind of helped make that come through. And I think a lot of people now that were opposed to it then are very much a part of it now. It's kind of a boring thing in Fell's Point, but it's also something that really touches the nerve of everybody. I've been trying to get involved with getting some better public transportation here but it hasn't happened yet so ... who knows ... I'm certainly hangin' in there and trying to help make that happen. I've worked on those things because they're kind of boring to other people. A lot of people are so much into architectural design and things like heights and densities of buildings and something called FARs – I don't even know what a FAR is – floor area ratio, but I don't know what that means anyway, so I've thought that they're not paying attention to some of the more boring parts of it like parking and transportation. So I've focused my attention on that area because there's enough people around that are looking at the other things.

[Jacquie]

If you could name one person that's living today that you feel has made the biggest contribution to Fell's Point, who would you say that would be?

[Bob]

There's so many people in Fell's Point that have given so much, Nancy Conrad and others in the earlier days. Sometimes people kind of finally just go back to what they're doing and leave it to others. One person who's really hung in there and has been a source of inspiration to a lot of people has been PJ, Preacher Jack. He sticks in there and he's very wise and very persuasive.