

Interview from the preparation of

Fell's Point Out of Time



PJ Trautwein Interview/Tour, January 13, 2004

***Kraig Greff, interviewer. Jacquie Greff, camera.
Kim Shapiro, Mike Pierce & Lisa Reynolds in audience.***

[PJ]

So this we would also talk about this was marshland in here and that's why the shipbuilding yards were in here. And that it was still a deep-water port in here, and that's why they could make the ocean-going vessels that they made. And the very important that part we bring up is the fact that this is where the Baltimore schooner originated. It was helped to be designed here and they were built here. And the Baltimore schooner played a extremely important role in the development of these United States. In the very beginning of the series, I say that Fells Point, the community of Fells Point, did more, offered more to the growth of this country than any other community in this country. And I go on to prove this in four different areas: commerce, shipbuilding, privateering and immigration – were the big contributions.

But now when we get to here this is really my area that I love.

[Cut for mic discussion; 01:01:20;22]

[PJ]

I really love this area because ... this is time that I talk about the War of 1812.

The War of 1812 was really over the northern boundaries of this country, an independent Indian nation in the Northwest Territory, and the dominance of the seas or trade and sailors' rights. This was what the War of 1812 was over. And it was really an extension of the Revolutionary War. The British, especially on the seas, thought that every ship out of the United States harbored sailors that were native to England. Therefore, they would board these ships on the high seas, impress the sailors and go on their way. Fells Point was very, very much affected by this because Fells Point was a key commerce center for these United States.

Now, what happened? June 17, 1812 Congress passed the fact of war with Great Britain. Great Britain, at that time, was in the Napoleonic wars in France, and we joined that effort. But, most of the country was against the war. As a matter of fact, Massachusetts never sent one soldier or did one thing to lift its hand for...

[cut for mic discussion & to change positions; 01:03:07;18]

[PJ]

Now... So United States at war with Great Britain. We did a terrible job in fighting the British. In the north, along the boundary with Canada we lost every major battle.

Now it is important to note that the only place the United States was doing anything was with the privateers on the high seas. Our Navy, which was very small, was all bottled up by British blockades, so the only navy that we had were the privateers. These privateers were operating out of places like Fells Point.

As a matter of fact, Fells Point had 56 privateers out on the high seas and in that short duration of time, two years, these privateers from Fells Point captured or destroyed over 500 British vessels. Therefore ... and it was done with the ships that were built here. The ships that were built here were highly maneuverable and they had a lot of speed. And so they could out-maneuver anything that the British had on the high seas, and these were the Baltimore schooners that were built right in these shipyards right down here.

The most famous of these was Thomas Kemp and the Chasseur. The Chasseur was out on the high seas and mainly stayed around the British Isles. He sent a sailor on land, posted a note on the house of Lords of London stating that the British Isles were blockaded. After the war, Thomas Kemp returned to Fells Point with the Chasseur and out on the pier where the Broadway Pier there, or thereabouts, a whole group of people, citizens gathered and hailed that ship as it came in the Pride of Baltimore. That was the original Pride of Baltimore was the Chasseur captained by Thomas Boyle.

[01:05:35;02]

Now, here, we came to this location because it is an excellent spot to see what happened during the War of 1812. It must be noted that, on August 24, the British had defeated the Americans at the Battle of Bladensburg and then went on to burn Washington. That was August 24, that's important. Immediately after that, Baltimore got together and under a committee of vigilance and safety, they appointed Sam Smith, General Sam Smith, a General of the Revolutionary Army, to coordinate the defense of Baltimore. Now, in 3 weeks, 3 weeks, Baltimore, Fells Point built, dug an entrenchment from right over here in Harris Creek on up through Patterson Park all the way up past the Pagoda. The Pagoda over here where the flag is, the flag and the Pagoda ... if you go on past that all the way up to Broadway and following that line up to Broadway and Gay ... that's how long that entrenchment was. In 3 weeks the citizens of Baltimore dug that entrenchment. In 3 weeks, they gathered over 15,000 troops here. There were 12,000 troops along that entrenchment. 3,000 troops over on the south side of the river. You had Fort McHenry. You had Camp Lookout. You had Fort Babcock and Fort Covington. Most of those forts, except for Fort McHenry, were finished or completed in those three weeks over here. They become very, very important to us.

Now, on the 12th of September, the British force landed over here some about 10 miles out North Point. They proceeded to march down North Point and their aim was right here in Fells Point. The British saw Fells Point as such a threat to them at sea that they wanted to destroy Fells Point more than any other place in the country. That's why the first group of reinforcements, fresh from the Napoleonic War, came to the Chesapeake Bay, first hit Washington, came up here to destroy Fells Point. So you can imagine that the people in Fells Point ... what they felt like when they heard the cannon announcing that the British had landed. They were right here. The British were right over here. The fleet was out 2 miles, 2-1/2 miles out past Fort McHenry... And Fort McHenry can be located by that Lazaretto Point, which is the square building, the silos... Right across that is Fort

McHenry. Now, in that 3 weeks they built a chain and boom line from Lazaretto Point to Fort McHenry. The day of the 12th, we sunk ships behind that boom line and placed gun ships behind that. The 12th, the British landed, started to come up.

[01:09:46;26]

Now the battle lines were this: You had your major line of defense which is right up here, and the people in Fells Point could see the soldiers right here. 12,000 of them. Right up there. Going down about 3, 4, 5 miles out was the first line of defense manned by Stryker's forces. Then, there was a skirmish group that was out beyond them. And it was that skirmish group that engaged General Ross who had preceded his armies. And General Ross was killed at that point for the British.

The British kept on coming. And there was the Battle of North Point, which lasted almost 2 hours. You could hear the cannons, etc. even in Fells Point. It was happening there. Then, the American troops retreated back, and it was an organized retreat back to the main line out here. British kept on coming and set up encampment about a mile, mile and a half from here on top of the ridge. So that night of the 12th, you could see the American fires and you could see the British fires from Fells Point.

And throughout the next day it rained like it was going out of style, but during that time, it was a chess match between the British and the American forces headed by Rogers, who was in the redoubt right up here by the Pagoda. The British went all the way up to, with a division, all the way up to Belair Road and Herring Run. They're trying to outflank. Couldn't do it. They came back. And it was a constant back and forth moving of troops. Meanwhile, on the 13th, the morning of the 13th, the ships from the British navy started to lob their 200 lb bombs over 2-1/2 miles on Fort McHenry. And that bombardment lasted all day and half the next night. And the British wanted to get past Fort McHenry so they could outflank these defense lines. Now...

[01:12:26;09]

[Kraig]

Just a minute. Quiet! [Yelled at the seagulls.] OK. Sorry.

[PJ]

The night of the 14th, 13 and 14th, they had to make a decision. The British had to make a decision whether to attack this reinforcement here or not. Because the Admiral, Admiral Cochran, told the armies that they could not get passed Fort McHenry. Because of the sunken ships, they could not make it. Therefore, they didn't have the outflank, the flanking maneuver. They decided, the Army decided, then, to retreat that night. But in the meantime, the people on the ships, Admiral Cochran didn't know they were going to retreat. So he sent a diversionary force up the Ferry Branch, which is the middle branch of the Patapsco River. About 1:00 - 2:00 - he started about 1:00, at about 2:00, everything broke loose because Fort Babcock and Fort Covington spotted this flotilla of British. And they said that at that time that South Baltimore just shook like one big earthquake for a couple of hours because of all the cannon fire that was going on. Because the cannons erupted not only in Fort Covington, Fort Babcock, but the Lookout, Fort McHenry, and Lazaretto Point ... everybody responded. It was just one big boom, plus it was a terrible thunder storm. So you had lightening, thunder and booms. And the people living in Fells Point, South Baltimore, and especially Fells Point

didn't know what was going on. They didn't know if the British had really made a breakthrough or not, so they were living in total fear. Next morning, of course, they found out that the forts had held and the British were in retreat.

[01:14:56;01]

Importance to Fells Point: No. 1 – All of the beach sailors made up the artillery groups, they manning the redoubts and manning the forts south here at Lazaretto Point. It was the sailors of Fells Point who had the battle experience. The armies didn't have the battle experience. It was the artillery, the sailors who had the battle experience from Fells Point. No. 2 – It is very important to note that it was the ships and privateers from Fells Point that eventually conquered the seas, gave the United States dominance of the seas. It's very important to note that a couple days prior to this battle here was the Battle of Plattsburg, the Battle of Champlain up north. And the United States forces prevailed there. They prevailed there. We turned back the British here. On August 2nd, the British gave terms of a treaty. That treaty, let me tell you, was disastrous. That treaty stated that the northern boundaries of the United States would not include the Great Lakes. The Great Lakes would all be a part of Canada. There would be an independent Indian nation in the Northwest Territory, that's in Ohio and northwest. The Mississippi River would be controlled by the British. These were the terms of the August 2, 1814 terms of the British to the United States. It was these battles here, our defense here, which turned that around. It placed the fact of all the borders being the same, that we have expansion to the west. And then No. 3 – The United States had dominance of the seas, which it would never give up to this day.

So it was here that was so important to the future look of the United States. The United States would not be as it is today if it hadn't been for what happened here and the contributions that Fells Point made. Very important. Some say, well what about the Battle of New Orleans? The Battle of New Orleans happened a full 2+ weeks after the treaty was signed. The treaty was signed on December 24th, Christmas Eve, 1814. The Battle of New Orleans happened in January, 1815. This was it right here. This was the deciding blow. And Fells Point was a major contributor to the outlook and future of the United States. It's as simple as that. And now we go on.

[Kraig]

Put your gloves on a second. Warm your hands up,

[Jacquie]

Can you go back and give the little bit of introduction that you gave when I was in a different camera position?

[Cut, 01:18:51;09]

[PJ]

We've come to this point in the tour. And we talk about perhaps my favorite subject and that's the war of 1812. Because Baltimore and Fells Point's contribution to the War of 1812 is so insurmountable. It was here that we can locate what happened during those few days in the War of 1812. Now, let me explain first that the War of 1812 was over the northern boundaries, an independent Indian nation, and also became the trade, free trade and the rights of sailors. Because our sailors were being taken by the British on the high seas and impressed. For the British really

thought that anybody in America was still a British citizen. And therefore they were short of sailors because their sailors were leaving whenever they could. And so they impressed the United States sailors on the high seas. So places like Fells Point were very up in arms. Trade, free trade – we could not trade with other countries except through England. This was hampering our efforts ... in commerce, especially in Caribbean in Europe. We couldn't, according to the British, trade outright with those countries. Therefore, Congress on June 17 in the year 1812 declared war on Great Britain while Great Britain was involved in the Napoleonic Wars in France.

[Kraig]

What's the difference between impression and Shanghai?

[PJ]

Impression is... Shanghaiing is taking somebody from a land position. Impressment was the fact that they thought they had the right to take them because they were British citizens and therefore they had the right to impress them into the British Navy because they were citizens. Shanghaiing is more of ... what would you call it, just taking them, it's a criminal act. Whereas this... they didn't think was a criminal act, because they thought they were British citizens. And they needed...

[Kraig]

One has a piece of paper associated with it and one doesn't.

[01:21:55;28]

[Jacquie]

Yeah, one puts you in jail and ...

[PJ]

It's the same with privateering. Privateering is legalized piracy. But it was the privateering that really was the Navy of this country. It was what gave this country dominance on the seas – was privateering. And all the merchants who put up the money ... see, the merchants would sponsor a privateer. And they would buy the ship and get the captain and everything. They were sponsoring the privateers. So it was a lot of money in Baltimore. Not so much in Fells Point. They made their money in Fells Point but lived in Baltimore. The merchants....

[Kraig]

Who was it, I guess Steve Bunker... The difference between Baltimore and Fells Point. Big difference. One is Baltimore and one is Fells Point.

[PJ]

Yeah, yeah. One was ... a working area and still is and the other was a financial center... But they got their finances through Fells Point. It was

[Kraig]

So if it wasn't for Fells Point, they wouldn't have had their nice homes.

[PJ]

They wouldn't have had the money.
[almost inaudible discussion]

[Kim]

It's interesting the boat that went over to the British Isles and came back was actually named Pride of Baltimore and not the Pride of Fells Point.

[PJ]

Yeah. See, by that time, up until well... In 1797, that was when Baltimore was incorporated. And it's interesting to note that the State Legislature made it a requirement that Baltimore Town and Jonestown who wanted to incorporate, could not incorporate unless they included Fells Point. Because Fells Point was the center of this commerce, and that's where the money was coming out of. So Fells Point turned them down twice to become a part of Baltimore. In 1797, they agreed and most likely that agreement happened in the London Coffee House over here. But they agreed with these terms – that Fells Point would never be taxed for the deepening of the Inner Harbor. See, the Inner Harbor at that time was marshland and had maybe up to 4, in some places 8 feet of water, but could not house, and could not maintain these ocean-going vessels that were coming into Fells Point. We had 12-14 foot depth natural harbor here, and we could take the oceangoing vessels. They couldn't. So that was the only stipulation. We'd never be taxed.

But its very interesting to note that most of the west side of Fells Point on the back end of the west of Bond Street, the water came up to the back of those houses on Bond Street. All that fill in there was most likely the fill that came from the Inner Harbor. So Fells Point was expanded with the fill of the Inner Harbor.

[01:25:52;13]

But anyway, the Pride of Baltimore, get back to that... By 1814, the people in Fells Point had felt a part of Baltimore. And it was identified as Baltimore. And it was losing its terminology as Fells Point, that single identity. It was losing that identity and merged into the city and that's why the Pride of Baltimore. But in many respects though, throughout the ages Fells Point has become and has been a sort of independent community... very much so. Independent thinking. Even to today. Fells Point could very well secede from the City and be happy. And probably thrive.

[Kraig]

I thought it already had.

[PJ]

And probably very happy in doing so.

[Kraig]

Got any questions Mike?

[Mike]

What time were most of the wharves built in their current configuration?

[PJ]

In their current configuration? The wharfs?

Well, it's a gradual process really. Because the more the land became valuable, the more they did fill. And the fill-ins then became the area of wharves ... the wharves grew out of. But there were wharves all along Thames Street from revolution little bit before the Revolution times, there were wharves there. You probably go back to 1870, 1860s there were some wharves along Thames Street.

Now on the west side over there, from Bond Street on down there was another series of shipbuilding yards. It must have been about 8 to 10 shipbuilding yards over there, intermingled with wharves. So it was stages. You can't say between the year 18..., 1780 and 84... It was just a gradual building up.

[01:28:36;01]

[Kim]

How long did shipbuilding continue in Fells Point?

[PJ]

Shipbuilding continued up until 1850. The golden years of Fells Point are considered to be from 1780's up into 1850. And it sort of followed along that shipbuilding trend. But, what happened was wooden ships were becoming obsolete by 1850. They were building the larger metal, steel steamships. And that operation moved across the river. And it was the when the wooden ships became antiquated that Fells Point... But there was a shipyard here up until ... in the 1970s over on Fell Street. The Hardeman Shipyards ... but that wasn't no big deal, but it carried on.

But it's interesting to note that the shipbuilding area, when that stopped, what picked up was canneries. We were right on the water, so we could get produce and seafood from eastern shore and the counties. And there was a series of canneries along this waterfront here. And it's an interesting story I like to give. And it's a story that makes a lot of sense. We had malaria epidemics here due to the marshland. So, it mustn't have been too many bird eating, birds that eat mosquitoes. But the canneries came and canneries draw a lot of bugs, all kinds of bugs they draw because they're open sheds. And it also a tremendous nesting ground for swallows, barn swallows. So, barn swallows came here by the droves. And up until very recently when they started to redo Fells Point, tear down a lot of the old buildings, etc., we had a very large population of barn swallows. And in my 30 years here, I don't remember getting bitten by a mosquito more than once or twice. But, recently the mosquito population has picked up because the barn swallows no longer have a natural nesting place and the barn swallows are diminishing. Yeah. And that all came about through the whole cannery process.

[Kraig]

No mosquitoes but you had the whole shit pecked out of your legs by the barn swallows...
[Laughter & sound effects]

[PJ]

It's interesting that the malaria epidemics in the early years, they thought that the disease was coming out of the basements. Most of these buildings had basements. And so they thought it was coming out of the basement, so they filled their basements in. And now people are ... have taken the dirt and rubble out of the basements and utilizing the basements again.

[Jacquie]

Until Isabel

[PJ]

Now, things like hurricanes come through and fill them up again.
[01:32:39;24]

[Jacquie]

PJ, would you come over and let me point the camera and tell me what I'm looking at? Come back here, you're not on camera I want to keep you on audio. I want you to tell me what parts you were point. See, I was focusing on you the whole time. So...

[PJ]

Lazaretto Point. The square building, the silos there. Keep going over this way. I want to see where I'm at. Keep going...

They're the silos. Now the silos that you see the large square building there that is Lazaretto Point... If you go over this way would be Fort McHenry. Almost where that crane would be would be, up in there, would be Fort McHenry.

Keep going... Between that brick tower and that brick building. You see the Pagoda there?

[Jacquie]

Look in view finder.

[PJ]

Pagoda is right in there behind the pole. That's the Pagoda. That's where the major redoubt was where Commodore Rogers commanded the artillery units.

[Jacquie]

Okay. What else did you want to talk about here?

[PJ]

I talked about the entrenchment line which went from right over here to Harris Creek... Right that's good enough ... and pan on up. Pan on up all the way to where you were and beyond. Just keep on going up to the church towers are. And that would be the entrenchment that stretched from Harris Creek up to Broadway and Gay. And that was entrenchment of redoubts and entrenchments.