

Interview from the preparation of

Fell's Point Out of Time



Romaine Somerville & Diana Hyde, January 26, 2004

Interviewer – Jacquie Greff; Camera – Kraig Greff

[Romaine]

My name is Romaine Somerville, and I've been officially been involved with Fells Point since 1993, when I came here as what might be called the interim Executive Director. However I stayed on for 10 years. I got very interested in developing a maritime museum and acquired the properties and the money for the Maritime Museum, which just opened this past summer. Emotionally I've been involved with Fells Point for a long time. During the road fight I was employed by the city as the executive director of the commission for historical and architectural preservation, and I couldn't take a stand on the road because the road people were suing the city. However, I did help a little bit with research and was constantly in contact to see what progress was being made and was very excited when they were one of the ... they were THE first community in the country to use the National Register for the Protection of Historic Properties by putting it on the National Register and therefore the road, which was to go through was funded ninety percent by federal state money and ten percent by local and they couldn't build it and destroy properties that were on the National Register. That's about it.

[Jacquie]

Diane?

[Diana]

Yes, I'm Diana Hyde and I've been involved with Maryland Historical Society and as such I've been involved with the Education Department and the children of the City of Baltimore and the State of Maryland, and sometimes we would get children from other places. As to when I ... guess sort of Fells Point sort of crept in. Very early we did a history of Baltimore, so I think that's when I first got involved with it, but I did know the Johnson Family and William Fell Johnson so, it had a personal.... I mean they were people who owned this area and very interesting about the rent that was paid to the former owners.

[Jacquie]

The ground rent?

[Diana]

The ground rent. This was unique to everywhere.

[Jacquie]

Is this unique to Baltimore?

[Diana]

Pretty much yes, and actually my daughter still has a ground rent which her grandmother left her which she had gotten from her grandfather, so ... all these things sort of tie together you sort of whirl around a little bit. I wasn't involved with the road fight just later on when they wanted to put the road under Fort McHenry, and I was involved with that. They made me chairman of the committee, but I was only a house wife, but the rest of the people opened doors and it was amazing.

[Jacquie]

So the Fort McHenry Tunnel was the result of the road not being routed through Fells Point?

[Diana]

I think so, yes.

[Jacquie]

So you did the clean up of the road?

[Cut for audio problem; 01:03:37;13]

[Diana]

Yes, and they were going to put the road underneath Fort McHenry. Now the road had to go somewhere, so you had to compromise and you tried to compromise without hurting. And they did move it over, so the Fort McHenry Tunnel is over. The other Maryland dry dock area is not in danger the Fort so much.

[Jacquie]

So what is the significance of the road? Why was it....

[Diana]

They were building interstates in United States, and I think this was Eisenhower. He realized that if we had either a catastrophe or worse still an invasion or something like that happening, we did not have the road structure. You've got to remember that this is the man who was in charge of the forces in Europe. He'd been in charge of all kinds of places before. Eisenhower's name comes up.... He was a...

[Jacquie]

This was during the Cold War?

[Diana]

Yes, but he was somebody who had to arrange to get things done that had to be done and had to plan things that had to be planned, and the interstates – we needed them, it's just like now..... while bridges and things are in bad shape because they haven't tended to them.

[Jacquie]

Now is there some reason why this was especially important to Baltimore too?

[Diana]

Everybody going from north to south had to go through Baltimore and it was frequently a very miserable experience.

[Romaine]

It was also financially interesting to the various communities that this interstate went through. It had already been built in Boston and in Philadelphia and built along the waterfront, which is one of the things that made the people in Baltimore realize that waterfront was not the place to put it. Society Hill, as you know, is completely cut off from the waterfront by the raised highway, and that was one of the things that inspired the people in Baltimore. However the government and the population in general was very much in favor of the interstate. They didn't really care where they put it, they just wanted the interstate because it was ninety percent federal and state funding and only ten percent local and it meant a lot of jobs and a lot of derelict property purchased for this road. But the group that got together realized that the property in Federal Hill, Fells Point, and Canton were actually more valuable than the road going through, and they defeated it. The connection would have been Washington to New York. That was the lake that we were on, and what they've done is much better.

[Diana]

Yes.

[01:06:47;12]

[Jacquie]

We kind of finished talking about the road and the significance of the road, and then as I understand it, Fells Point after the road was a mess. That a lot of the properties had kind of decayed and...

[Romaine]

What they called the taking line for the road was a... they had erected a chain link fence, and the properties inside this chain link fence during the prolonged road fight just continued to deteriorate and deteriorate, but then something very good happened. The city set up excellent standards for rehabilitation of historic property within these taking lines, and first allowing the families that had originally owned the properties to come back and purchase them. They put them up for sale to the public at a very reasonable price, with the condition that you had to restore them to the standards that they had selected, so that the properties on Lancaster and Shakespeare even now are restored to much higher standards than a lot of other work that went on in the community, and the same thing with Montgomery Street in Federal Hill. Those were the properties that were deteriorating for years and I have some excellent pictures I could show you of what people took on and what they did with them later. They verge on the unbelievable.

[Jacquie]

I might ask to use them if you are willing.

[Romaine]

Yes.

[Jacquie]

Okay. Is there any more perspective beneath the one that you want to make about the early days of ... or Diana do you want...

[Romaine]

Yes....

[Diana]

I think without... Mrs. Fisher really was the persistent spearhead. I think a lot of the successful preservation ... there is usually one person, frequently a woman, and of course [can't understand name] was a cannon, a man, but the rest... were... practically all of them were women who spent day in day out, year in, year out to preserve.

[Jacquie]

And why was it a woman frequently?

[Diana]

I don't know. Maybe women... Women are detailed oriented and they're persistent and it was important to them... And women think of the future a lot because of their children.

[Romaine]

I think they also had the time to do it, where as the men were occupied with their own jobs and they were also in a position to fight the establishment, so to speak, because they didn't have jobs to lose or alienate....

[Diana]

And they had ties... They had ties with various and sundry things. When I was doing the thing with the roads, we went right into the development office of the planning of the City of Baltimore. We were ushered right in. Well, Dr. Huntington Williams arranged that. He was retired but he'd been the health officer of the city. He knew the political structure. So a lot of these people got that kind of help because you don't get anywhere unless you understand how something is working, and which person... how you go about it... and which person you ask to do what. Because a lot of them will say it's not my job or they'll shuffle for responsibility or you will ask, have you talked to the manager and then say, may I work with so and so because you've already found out that's the person who gets things done in that office and maybe the only one. But you have to go through the proper chain. So you either start at the top and work down or you start at the bottom and work up, and you get results that way. And this is the way it was done.

[Jacquie]

Now Diana, Romaine has told me that she thinks that the thing that she can really speak to the most is the creation of and funding of the Maritime Museum. Is there something in particular or things from looking at my outline that you feel like you can especially speak to?

[01:11:12;04]

[Diana]

Well, I think that getting people ... the ordinary people to be aware of Fells Point ... this was a big drive when you start a historic district. A lot of the people feel it's not for them, and then when you start getting up the information, this is where all the waves of immigration ... immigrants came ... you name it, everybody was here...

[Romaine]

I think the real thing that brought people down to Fells Point, and again was an idea put forth by Lou Fischer was the Fells Point Fun Festival. She started that immediately, with the idea of showing people a good time, but at the same time making them aware of Fells Point. And that attracts over half a million people now down here – for all the booze and the food and the beer drinking and the rock bands and everything else that goes with it. But it does bring them down here to see that there is something here, in the beginning something to save, and now some place ... it's a good place to live, and to come and visit. So I think that the best publicity we ever had was the Fells Point Fun Festival, which continues to operate. And then they also did the house tours which brought potential home buyers down. And I've always looked at the house tours as a home buying project, because you come down and one of the reactions that we generally get is “oh I didn't know that there was so many beautifully done properties down here.” Because they all look basically the same on the outside, and then when they go in and see how people have made them into very, very livable buildings – sometimes by adding a kitchen wing in the back...doing different things. But I think that the... first the Fells Point Fun Festival and secondly the house tours have brought people down. Then of course the bars. We get a lot of young people coming down to the bars, and that's what's made them aware. When Willard Hackerman gave us some money to purchase the London Coffee House, he said that one of the reasons he was interested in Fells Point is that the promotional literature from Loyola says that it's near Fells Point. It's a big attraction to college kids, and he thought if it was that important to Loyola College in attracting students, there must be something down here.

[Jacquie]

Now Diana when you said making people aware of Fells Point, you're talking about people outside of Fells Point.

[Diana]

Yes, just ordinary people and this was a nice place to come down. That it had been used this way over a couple of hundred years and still could be, so ... because a lot of people feel left out. And this is what the Fun Festival did, and then you see, they were having a problem in Baltimore. I was involved with the Baltimore community schools ... having a problem in Baltimore, and so they had taken mothers who were on welfare, they gave them street car money, and they stood in the halls in the schools and kept order. But of course these were the women who knew the children who lived in the neighborhood. The children went to the neighborhood schools. And so these kids, if they wanted to do something bad they'd go to some other neighborhood. And that's when they had the whole festival of everywhere.

[Jacquie]

I see...

[Diana]

And so yes, because you see the people who live in one little area in Baltimore sort of knew each other. These people all knew each other, and these people all knew each other, and ... but when they came down to Fells Point it was sort of all...with this fun festival, it was so successful. It was for them. They felt that there...

[01:15:19;24]

[Jacquie]

If you think of Baltimore and you think of the United States and you think of Fells Point, how do they all fit together, what's the big picture?

[Diana]

Well, Baltimore is a big city which is really a small town. I don't think you can say that of too many of the big cities.

[Romaine]

Fells Point existed before Baltimore City, although Baltimore Town existed before Fells Point, and there was a port where the inner harbor is now, and by the mid eighteenth century a nice little village had grown up there, interestingly with a number of taverns, because people rolled their tobacco down, and brought there other goods to the port, and then they would stop and eat and enjoy themselves with the money they made in the taverns. And then Fells Point was a separate community over here, which was a good mile away, and then up along the Jones Falls there was a third community called Jones Town. And in 1791, I believe it was, the three communities were joined together, so that Fells Point was then surrounded by Baltimore City as was Jones Town, but a major portion of Jones Town was destroyed in urban renewal, and a major portion, just about all of Baltimore Town was destroyed in the big fire of 1904, so that Fells Point has survived as the only relic from that period.

[Jacquie]

Okay.... I think I saw a book where they were talking about the fire just ... Fells Point narrowly escaping this fire

[Romaine]

Yes, it went right to the Jones Falls and stopped.

[Diana]

Yes, and something about Baltimore, and this is true of Fells Point too – everybody lived there. The very poorest lived in the alleys, in little houses in the alleys. The richer person lived in the big house on the corner. The butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker lived in little houses along the street. They all lived together. It was like a village.

[Romaine]

Which is typical of any eighteenth century city, because transportation wasn't what we know it. It wasn't until the trollies came in around 1900 that suburbs like Roland Park were developed. You had to live near your work. And if you traced the residences of a workman during the eighteenth or even nineteenth century, you'll find every time he changed his job, he moved. You had to live near your work, because you couldn't afford a horse and carriage to get there if you were a workman, and also proprietors lived near their business. I think an excellent example of that is the brewery.

[Jacquie]

Brewery?

[Romaine]

Yes the big brewery with the great big Victorian towers and all is still standing, the owners had their mansions right next to it, and they still stand too.

[Jacquie]

Now, how much of that continues to be true of Fells Point now?

[Romaine]

Some of the business and tavern owners live down here, but I continue to be surprised when I try to reach someone in the evening, because I still do design review for them, that I'll find that they live in Towson or Roland Park and come down, so it's stopping. However in this period right after the road fight was won, I think that a lot of the small business owners lived down near their businesses. I think it was this morning's paper, though, had an article that the small businesses, particularly the taverns are fast vanishing, either because their old neighborhood customers have moved away or there is bigger, more interesting businesses taking it over. We should probably...

[Jacquie]

Baltimore generally or Fells Point?

[Romaine]

I'd say Fells Point and East Baltimore they were focusing on in this article, which would be the Canton area you know. But right after the road fight, you did have local businesses, where people continued to live down here, and you also had a lot of artists and musicians moving down. For example Grace Hartigan, who is still here, has her studio on Broadway ... and I'm having a mental block cause there's others here but I can't think...

[Kraig]

I'm here...

[Romaine]

Yes you're here that's a good one, and what's her name on Dallas Street...

[Jacquie]

Vince Peranio ...

[Romaine]

Oh yeah, Vincent Peranio and Delores Deluxe – they would be fantastic to interview for that period because there was a whole community of them down here, who came. The houses were very, very inexpensive, even after the road was won. Until 1995, I'd say, you could buy property here very reasonable, which was the period in which I bought the properties to develop the Maritime Museum. Then all of a sudden, the whole thing's gone wild.

[scratching on mic; 01:20:49;28]

[Jacquie]

Do you want to talk about the Maritime Museum now?

[Romaine]

Yes, I came here in 1993, at the request of some of the board members, and Carol and Don Kervot, who was the previous Executive Director. They were unable to find someone that they thought had the right experience. I had a lot of preservation experience, also I had been Director of the Maryland Historical Society for a number of years, and before that I was Director of the City Commission for historical and architectural preservation, so I kind of knew the territory, so to speak. And I agreed to come down, and the day after I arrived, it might have been even day, my first day, Lou Fischer shows up and she says, "what this community needs is a maritime museum, and I'm willing to give you 1732 Thames Street if you can buy the property that we're now right in, 808 South Ann Street which will hook up to my other...", meaning Lou Fischer's other property, which is where the Maritime Museum is now. So I thought about it, and I thought gee, yeah this place has tremendous potential that we haven't even begun to tap, as a matter of fact I think that the expression that came to mind was, these people are sitting on a gold mine and they not doing anything, and so I bought, through a particular strategy, I bought this building for them. They had an option to buy it, but I pushed the owner to follow through on it – she had been avoiding them.

[Jacquie]

Now Lou's offer, was that primarily philanthropic or did she make a little bit of money off of the deal at the same time?

[Romaine]

In the beginning it was philanthropic – she gave us the one building, completely free and clear, we did buy the other.

[Diana]

She had put in hours and days and thousands of dollars, she owned a lot of property.

[Jacquie]

She seems to be very controversial, because people like yourself and Bob Eney, you know, credit her with being a visionary and having done a lot for the community....

[Diana]

She definitely was visionary.

[Romaine]

Well, she bought a lot of property, and she didn't make money on that property. But, they wanted to sell it, they wanted to sell and get out, the old community. I think it's unfair to speak badly of her now, because she had the vision to buy property that nobody else wanted, and she had... I understand she did have a lot property down here, and gave us that 1732, which is one of the finest residential buildings to survive in Baltimore City. It's a magnificent building, I'm sure you've been in it. And then she sold us for what at the time was the exact appraisal for the Maritime Museum, mean time I had gone to the State and got very good support from William Donald Shaffer in that he directed me to the right people in the finance department, and they helped me write a proposal for money to do this. He too saw the potential of Fells Point. And in 1994 I got a, it actually came through in '95, so lets call it '95. In 1995, I got a grant for \$1,100,000 from the state to do this maritime museum complex. And we had to raise an additional \$1,100,000. And the people who helped us and believed in us in the beginning were the France Foundation, who gave us a \$75,000 challenge grant to do this particular building. And once you have that kind of money it's reasonable to go to other foundations and ask for money, and we got a number of ... the Hahn Foundation gave us a \$120,000... I'm having a mental block

[Jacquie]

So once you had the major funding...

[Romaine]

We got our major funding, which, and they were challenge grants, in that they wouldn't give us the grant unless we raised matching money, so in the end we've raised almost \$3,000,000 for this complex. But we were fortunate enough to buy the property before prices went up. And Lou Fischer sold us the building that the Maritime Museum is in, which at that point had the Daily Grind in it, and was in deplorable condition, really deplorable, at exactly what the appraiser said it was worth at that time, which I think is a fraction of what it would be worth right now, even in the condition that it was in.

[Jacquie]

So, it sounds like William Donald Shaffer was instrumental in helping Fells Point.

[Romaine]

Yes he was.

[Diana]

Yes

[Jacquie]

I understand he was a big road advocate at one point too, so he made a turn around?

[Romaine]

You should interview him sometime and he gives his speech about how he was converted.

[Diana]

It isn't a question of turnaround. You needed both.

[Romaine]

We just had to put the road in a different place.

[mic bumped; cut; 01:26:23;15]

[Romaine]

And he is a tremendous advocate now for historic preservation. And, as I said, he saw the potential here. He put me in touch with the right people, to help write a proposal for state bond bail money to do this. And with the combination of getting the bond bail proposal passed, and then getting the first \$75,000 from France-Merrick, then they gave us, when successfully finished this building they gave us another \$75,000 for the Maritime Museum.

[Jacquie]

What would you say was your biggest challenge in getting... I mean this is a big accomplishment.

[Diana]

Certainly is.

[Jacquie]

What would you say is the most difficult part of it?

[Romaine]

I think making people, including my own board, realize what the potential was here, and that the time was right to do something about it. Because at this period, too, we also purchased the London Coffee House and the George Wells House.

[Jacquie]

So the Preservation Society owns them?

[Romaine]

We sold them to Constellation Properties. But they were going to tear them down, that's an interesting story in itself. Constellation Properties was making an exchange with the City, in which this sort of patch work quilt of parking lots through out the west side of the community, was being exchanged for the Chase's Wharf property, which the city then gave to the Living Classrooms. And Constellation came to a community meeting on a Wednesday or Thursday and said that if the community would go along with this exchange of property, giving these lots to Constellation Properties and in return they would give the City Chase's Wharf, which would then go to Living Classrooms, that they would not demolish the George Wells House and the London Coffee House.

So everybody went along with it, and on Friday, and the reason I remember it was Friday, because we had so much trouble getting people over the weekend, Bunk, not Bunker, the fellow from the store on Lancaster, I've reached the age where I forget people's names ... PJ. PJ's walking his dog over on that land there, and the dog ran behind the properties, that means away from Bond Street, and there were two enormous signs, big red signs, posted on the buildings that they would be demolished in 48 hours. And when we called Constellation they said oh that wasn't them, that the buildings were in such poor, condition the City decided to condemn them. So we ran around all weekend getting the condemnation notices lifted, and then we were given a very short period of time to purchase the buildings and stabilize them. And that was during the same time that we were raising the money for the Maritime Museum, but PJ's dog saved those buildings. There's a marvelous picture of everybody that was involved in saving those buildings, and PJ's dog.

[Diana]

People were probably wondering why the dog is in the picture – very important component.

[Romaine]

And the person who gave us a lot of support on that issue was Perry Sfikas. who was a real friend to this neighborhood.

[Jacquie]

Yeah, I know he has been because I've been....
[01:30:25;14]

[Romaine]

Right, and so anyway, life is a constant battle down here. And we've had the same problem with the developers, who are anxious. In 1975 the urban renewal ordinance was written after the road fight to help people redevelop this area. And the feeling was nobody's going to come down here, we better give them everything we can possibly give them. So the densities and the height regulations were extremely generous, with the idea that no one was going to develop every speck of the land. But what's happened is, every speck of the land is not only being developed to the densities, which were considered extremely generous in 1975, but everybody is getting variances. And the community has been at hearings for the last, I think we started in 1999 when the developers began to ask for variances, and we figured out we've been in something like 300 meetings and hearings trying to get the reasonable density and height restrictions on the new development. We are going to be completely surrounded with high-rise buildings, based on the permissions that have been given so far, and the only people that are going to be able to see the water, is from the corner on Anne and Thames to our Maritime Museum, and the Daily Grind. Everybody else is going to be blocked off from the water.

[Jacquie]

Talk a bit about why that's important, either one of you.

[Romaine]

Well, people come down here because of the water and the water views, and three things are going to happen with this development. First of all people will be cut off from the water, and sometimes unfairly, although I must say sometimes we've been able to fight it, for example...

[Jacquie]

Cut off being visually cut off or...

[Romaine]

Visually cut off and physically cut off.

[Diana]

In other words, what's happening is what the road would have done.

[Romaine]

Well, in a way, yes. But there is certain designated public passageways to the promenade, and about three months ago, one of the developers from Swan's Wharf came in and said very magnanimously, I am giving you an eight foot pedestrian passage way from Fell Street to the water. And a group of us thought this doesn't sound right. We went back and looked to the planning department, and found out he was supposed to give us a fifty-foot passage way to the water. And this has been happening constantly. Struever Brothers backed everybody into a corner – we wanted a plaza at the foot of Bond Street, and finally they said yes, we'll give you the plaza at the foot of Bond Street, but you have to give up the passage way from Thames Street to the water, which is further west. So people reluctantly agreed to that, and then the next thing we know, they're making the plaza considerably smaller than they were supposed to, Lois Gary helped us with that, got it back to the size it was supposed to when the legislation went through, and then they turn around the next summer and try to get it closed for 22 weekends out of the year, which is every summer weekend, and we're assuming that the reason is that they wanted to rent it for parties, and it's supposed to be a public plaza. And we fought back, and I don't know why we caved in, we're allowing them to close it for 12 weekends during the summer. It's just been a constant fight of trying to get access to the waterfront for the community. And the buildings that are going up are between ... some of them are as low as 65 feet, but many of them are 90 to 125 feet.

[Jacquie]

Where are these building...

[Romaine]

I have a map that will show you.

[Jacquie]

If you could just describe it...

[Romaine]

Okay, they go from ... do you know where Henderson's Wharf is, which is already developed? Alright there will be a project called Henderson's Wharf that will start there. The next one over is Swan's Wharf. Right next to that, on the same line, is Union Wharf. Then you have The Cannery that's already in apartments, and beyond that O'Cyrus has a lot. That will be developed – that takes that whole side of the community...cut off from the water. Then go over to, have you seen the Bond Street Wharf? Well there's even taller buildings going ... if we can save the Bond Street Plaza, which I think we have to watch every minute ... going from there all the way over to the Living Classrooms area, and we have already raised from the 45 foot height to 60-some along Caroline Street. And Caroline Street, if you look at it now, has the garage surrounded by what they call the wrap, and next to that is the garage for the Whitman Requardt, then the Whitman Requardt Building, which was supposed to be 40-foot residences, but they got an exception on that, and then across from that is the one that we just lost so to speak of the what we call the Bohager's Lot, and then we're now going to City Council with the PUD for the Constellation property, which is going to have enormous buildings on the water, because they don't want to build up on the cap over the polluted area.
[Cut; microphone noise; 01:36:31;26; Jacquie walks in front of camera]

[Romaine]

The hearing on this which you should go to is Constellation Property is on Wednesday. They're presenting a proposal to the Fells Point Task Force, which we formed so that we would have a community review and not just design committee review of all these new developments.

[Jacquie]

Can you talk real quick about these committees you're talking about, you mentioned Design Committee you mentioned....

[Romaine]

The Design Committee gets it's authority from the urban renewal ordinance, and they are supposed to review any exterior changes to historic properties or new building in the area that overlaps with the historic district and the urban renewal area, which is complicated because the urban renewal area is one shape and the historic district is another shape, but there's part of it where they both overlap. The Fells Point Task Force was formed maybe in 2000 with the help of Perry Sfikas, and Kay Hogan from the Homeowners at that time and I helped to write some of the regulations and so forth. And the purpose of it was, when the new developers were coming in they wouldn't have to go to each individual community group, and we have more community groups here than you can possibly imagine, Fells Point Homeowners, the Community Organization, which is the renters, the Antiques Association, the Food and Beverage Association, the Business Association, I could just go on, there is something like eighteen of them, and the presidents of all of these associations now meet to hear proposals and other problems, then they're supposed to be given one month to go back to their communities and explain what's going on, and then come back and vote. This community input is required by the urban renewal ordinance.

[Jacquie]

Now, you mentioned all these community organizations, there's a number of them, is this unusual that there would be so many different organizations in a community.

[Romaine]

No there's many different interests down here, although it's my understanding that Fells Point has a few more than most communities do, which is why it was such a good idea to form the Task Force and get everybody together and to see if we could come up with consensus on various issues, and then there is also the Waterfront Coalition, have you talked to Carolyn Boitnott?

[Jacquie]

No.

[Romaine]

Okay she's helped to form the Waterfront Coalition, which includes us and Canton, and ... I would really like to see an organization that goes all the way around the water and includes Federal Hill and...

[Cut; end of tape; 01:39:27;01]

[Romaine]

We're about to enter a new era of overdevelopment

[Jacquie]

I want to here about the DeShields, and I also want to hear each of your perspectives on development and overdevelopment and what the issues are and the problems. Because I do want to make sure it's clear the different viewpoints on development in the documentary. It's a very difficult concept in many respects. [additional interviewer comments] Let's here about the DeShields first, and then lets go back to development.

[Diana]

Yes, well, I knew a Miss DeShield who was a nurse and she was a wonderful person, and these were her cousins, and they lived in the **State Bar** on Aliceanna Street.

[Romaine]

I thought they lived in Roland Park before that, until they burned the house down.

[Diana]

Yes, before that. They were eccentric. I would go there and I always wore washable clothes including my hat, the hat usually had to be washed about three times before I could wear it again. They had pets running around, they never put them outside. You watched where you were walking or sitting or putting your hand or anything, you would go there one day and one would have on a dress, not a clean dress. And you would go the next time and the other one had on the dress, and it definitely had not been cleaned, because the stains were still in the same place and there were more. Their father had been ... seafaring people. They had all these wonderful things, they had

portraits, they had log books. They did ... I don't know why, maybe because I talked differently, or because of this cousin who vouched for me, no she was dead ... anyway they allowed me to take the log books to the Historical Society. Dr. **Chatall** was the Maritime Curator at that time, and they knew him and they trusted him. I was allowed to take them ... he xeroxed them and I took them back to them a few days later. So at least that material was saved, but you know the cat was ... the dog chased the cat and the cat jumped through the face of the portrait, I think it's a Miriam Peale portrait, but it's something like that. The thing's just leaning around. They were two ladies who really shouldn't have been on their own, but they were... But they had such interesting things. I mean they had enough in there to fill a maritime museum, and I don't know whether any of it...

[Romaine]

But some of it has disappeared, people just helping themselves ... maritime material, the portraits, the furniture, the navigation equipment, Bob Eney ...

[Jacquie]

So what happened with this, I mean....

[Diana]

They have died, and there's some relative who owns the property. They own property over on the Eastern Shore, and I think I've maybe talked to him once on the phone or something, but this was in the, I guess the middle '70's that I was doing this. And you know it was just a shame, I was trying to save it, but there wasn't ... I did the best I could, and I was able to get some of it saved.

[Romaine]

There's also supposed to have been a beautiful silver set that Gregory Wideman had looked at.

[Diana]

I didn't see that.

[Romaine]

But when they had the ... it's my recollection that when they had the fire in Roland Park, they were on the verge of bankruptcy because they would mortgage one property down here to buy another, and the house of cards was about to fall down. And a judge allowed them to keep the two houses on Wolf Street which the Preservation Society is now very much involved in preserving because they are early wooden houses one and a half stories tall, very interesting ... What they call the Academy on Aliceanna, which is also a wooden structure and it's supposed to be the first school in Fells Point, and the two buildings next to it, which were Italianate bracketed style, and that was where they were living when you were visiting them. But in addition to that the building at the end of the block there was the original Captain DeShield House, and you can see the Flemish bond and the alterations that were done to it ... And the rest of the property went into this bankruptcy suit to pay off their debts. And these five properties were turned into a nonprofit. And the Preservation Society is now trying to deal with them to preserve these properties and maybe open them to the public. Bobby Eney knows a lot more about what was in the collection originally, and what has disappeared. But I gather a lot of it has disappeared, and even what remains, as Diana said, has been destroyed by the

animals that lived in the house full time. But both sisters are dead now, and what remains is in a nonprofit foundation. But nothing's happening because the cousin, distant cousin on the Eastern Shore, who is now in charge of it, is very reluctant to do anything really significant.

[Diana]

Like the two ladies.

[Romaine]

Yes.

[Diana]

They wanted to do it. They talked about having a maritime museum....

[Romaine]

But nothing happened. Anyway they were very interesting local characters.

[Jacquie]

Are there any other characters that stand out like that?

[Kraig]

They are smiling. Don't just bypass them. Let them tell their story.

[Diana]

Well, I said I used to ... I don't know how I ... somebody has maybe said that they had all these things, and so I don't know whether I was challenged to go, so maybe I just plain old called them up and said I knew Miss DeShield, who was the nurse, and I understood she was a cousin, could I come visit them. So fortunately the first time ... I used to volunteer over at Hopkins and I had an old raincoat, an old green raincoat which I always wore when I was in areas which weren't to good because if you dressed up well and had your good jewelry on, you were going to get robbed. But if you had on an old raincoat and walked briskly nobody ever bothered you, so I fortunately had on washable clothes, you see. It was horrendous. People who go in there and say they couldn't breathe, it was SO bad.

[Kraig]

Like how many animals, ten, twenty?

[Diana]

No they didn't have a lot but they never put them outside.

[Jacquie]

And they never cleaned up after them.

[Diana]

Of course not! I mean can you imagine wearing the same dress, two sisters wearing the same dress month in, month out, and never washing it?

[Kraig]

In the same place where the animals go?

[Diana]

Yes.

[Kraig]

Did they eat right along ... did you ever see them eat?

[Diana]

Yes, I would see them eat. They really couldn't cope with life. They really needed...

[Kraig]

Medical attention.

[Diana]

They needed medical attention. They had phobias and mental states and you never knew what it was going to be.

[Jacquie]

But according to Bob Eney, they were fairly visionary in terms of...

[Romaine]

They were visionary and they were also very intelligent, and they went to Vassar I believe.

[Diana]

Yes.

[Romaine]

But they were just unusual.

[Diana]

Well, see I had been I think dealing with children around the Historical Society didn't prepare me for this, but I used to go down to Hopkins in the Child Life Program. And they had asked me if I would like employment as a psychiatric aid, so I guess I was able to do the unexpected, so...

[Kraig]

So the DeShields, they found you...

[Diana]

They accepted me. They accepted me. I don't know why but they accepted me. People seem to remember my voice, or because I have a different accent. I would go, and the children would remember my voice, they would remember my name, they would remember me. I don't think I make an impression particularly but ... I talk differently.

[Kraig]

Where are you from?

[Diana]

I'm from Bermuda.

[Kraig]

Oh ... you have a British accent, because it's all British.

[Diana]

Yes, yes...

[Romaine]

Her father was the governor.

[Diana]

No he wasn't, he was the Chief Justice.

[Romaine]

The Chief Justice, sorry.

[Kraig]

Whatever, you're not going to get impeached for anything ... you know.

[Diana]

Well, no he would catch you first, I mean ... I don't ever remember telling a lie to my father because he knew right away. He was a pro.

[Cut for mic adjustments; 01:49:51;15]

[Diana]

So families sometimes have difficulty from generation to generation. But Captain DeShield who had these original stuff ... he was a successful man ... He was a sea captain, and a merchant, and he accumulated stuff, but they just hadn't gotten the practical

[Romaine]

One was Mary and the other was Eleanor Mary and Eleanor.

[Diana]

So, it was quite an experience.

[Kraig]

The only last question. It's just a little bit of humor ... like what kind of foods did they eat, a sandwich?

[Romaine]

Ask Bob.

[Diana]

No, no it was something out of a can sort of like tomatoes. You know how you can buy now tomatoes that are Mexican style, seems to me I remember that it was something, it was tomatoes and celery mixed up, but it wasn't a proper meal. There was no protein in it, there was no starch in it. It was just a few vegetables that you would of used to season up a soup or season up a salad or something. They couldn't take care of themselves.

[Kraig]

Could diet have a large thing to ...

[Diana]

I think so. I think diet had a lot to do with their strangeness.

[Kraig]

You know where I was going with this. I was thinking like did you ever see them eat cat food, that's where I was going...

[Diana]

Well, there was food for the animals all over the place, I mean you had to watch where you went, but the thing is the animals, there was no litter box. The dogs ... they were little dogs ... one or two.

[Kraig]

What other kind are there for those type of people?

[Diana]

They were never outside ... you know ...

[Kraig]

This is enough for me. I'm happy. Let's go ahead and move on.

[01:51:46;17]

[Jacquie]

Before we totally leap off the DeShields, are there any other people in the neighborhood that qualify as characters ... stand out.

[Diana]

I'm sure there were. I didn't know them.

[Romaine]

I think PJ was a character. Did you interview him?

[Jacquie]

Yes, we interviewed PJ but talk about PJ. I mean your view of PJ. Sometimes it's nice when one person we interviewed introduces another person.

[Diana]

Well, I think that Mrs. Fischer was a character.

[Romaine]

Yes she was.

[Diana]

She was sufficiently a business woman. She was able to do successfully what the DeShields were trying to do ... Buy property...

[Romaine]

Buy property and to do minimum restoration and rent it or sell it. She was very successful. The last one that she did is next to the house that she has her own apartment in. Although she lives in Ruxton, she does have an apartment down here.

[Jacquie]

Yes, we've seen her. We interviewed her up there. She was one of the first interviews we did.

[Romaine]

In her apartment down here...

[Jacquie]

Up on the third floor.

[Romaine]

And she just restored the building next door. Did an extremely good job on that one.

[Jacquie]

Yes, we saw it, it's beautiful, I mean she was doing ... it was going to be in the house tour.

[Romaine]

Some of the ones that she's done are just enough to paste them back together and rent them. And she also had some property in Canton. She was a real, real estate ... not developer, but ...

[Kraig]

Baroness?

[Diana]

No ...

[Romaine]

Baroness .. no ... speculator I think might be a better word.

[Diana]

The Johnson family owned a huge number of properties down here, and they gradually sold them, but they kept the ground rents.

[Romaine]

The Johnsons gave all their portraits to the Maryland Historical Society within the last five years or so.

[Diana]

I think William Fell Johnson, who was an old man when I knew him... I think he was a character, and I think he lived down here. And his house was full of you know, uncashed checks and things like that. But could be that he had gotten old and couldn't cope. And often when people get old and can't cope they don't eat properly, and then they can't cope even more so.

[Romaine]

David Key is not so much a character but a successful young developer who set up the Daily Grind, and now has smaller coffee houses through out the city. He had the original Daily Grind in the building that now is the maritime museum. I think he is note worthy because of that, and the couple from Bolton Hill who came in and established the bears ... the store, did anybody talk about them?

[Jacquie]

No, nobody's talked about them, but we've been in that store. It was nice to see that it didn't radically change when they sold it.

[Romaine]

When they sold it ... and I'm trying to think of anybody ... the whole place ... In order to be here in the first place you have to be a character, because it's not what most Americans think of as suburban living or regular residential living.

[01:55:12;02]

[Jacquie]

How would you describe this place? If someone had never been here, and was trying to figure out, lets suppose that somebody is just watching this you know documentary, how would you two characterize it?

[Romaine]

I would say it was an eighteenth century town that had survived within the confines of Baltimore City with its original waterfront, its original street pattern, and hundreds of eighteenth and nineteenth century houses, some very well restored, and some poorly restored. And many of them with there own flavor. And I don't think there could ever be a Williamsburg or even an Alexandria type restoration, because there is so much individuality. And what people have done with some of the properties is really quite off-beat. Bob Quilter and I who is the city person who helps us with, who was are city liaison really, with the Design Review Committee, feel that the standards for Fells Point have to be different than they are for any other historic district in order to allow for the individuality of some of the people that come here, and also to allow for the many, many taverns that we have here that are what attract the nightlife, and as you know the nightlife goes on until 3:00 in the morning.

[Diana]

Is there as much nightlife as there was, say, twenty years ago?

[Jacquie]

Shop owners have complained that over the last couple of years they've lost a lot partly to the Power Plant Live downtown ... there's not as many people ...

[Romaine]

Coming over ... and they're going to lose more to Harbor East, which will have many restaurants and retail shops, and all ...

[Jacquie]

But you started to say why Fells Point attracted these characters, and I don't know if you finished your thought ... because it does.

[Romaine]

It does attract them, and I think in the beginning it attracted them because it had the ambience of a historic district and the waterfront – waterfront is very important in this whole equation – but also at that time the buildings were inexpensive, you could buy a building and restore it meticulously or just live in it the way it was. And we had this interesting combination of beautifully restored buildings and then right next to it someone who just did the minimum ... made them able to inhabit it. And that accounted for this very unusual variety of people down here. You had the old households, working families, many who were becoming quite elderly, then you had the musicians and artists who came down because it was an off-beat place, and they felt like they could be themselves down here, and that would be Delores Deluxe's group and some of the other musicians and so forth. And then the young people who came down to restore property, who were the ... my feeling is that the real historic preservation movement is a relativity new thing. Historic preservation started out with big

important buildings like Mount Vernon, Washington's home, or Monticello, Jefferson's home, but now preservation is individuals with private money restoring houses, what I call vernacular houses, that don't have great value in themselves, but are absolutely priceless in the fabric of the community when you put it all together. And that's what we have in Fell's Point is a lot of vernacular buildings, a few maybe more interesting like Jean Hepner's house and Arnold Capute's, and the 1732 that we have, but there held together by this large mass of eighteenth and nineteenth century buildings that create a community with a character all of its own. Which is why many of us are very disturbed about the heavy new development, which is going to destroy that character, and cut people off from the waterfront and dump thousands of cars onto the little tiny streets.

[01:59:57;25]

[Jacquie]

Okay, we're back at development, lets talk development a little bit more.... You talked about blocking the people off from the water. I have just one more question about that. I know the city has this plan of having a promenade all around the harbor. Is some of the development in Fells Point putting that at risk?

[Romaine]

They've tried to, but I think we fought for most of the designated entrances or passageways to the ... what we call the promenade. But between the historic community and the promenade will be these high rise buildings, some residential, mostly office, so that visually, people who could see the waterfront from their front door or their second floor or sometimes their third floor, will no longer be able to see the water. Because the development is going on the industrial lots that surrounded the community, which were the places where the eighteenth and nineteenth century people made their living, the warehouses and the docks and so forth, which have disappeared, and left vacant lots which are now being developed within Fells Point 90 feet high, and that's really high when you are in a little two and a half story house ... and on the edges up to a 125 at this point, which is very high, and 190...

[Jacquie]

Talk about some more about the ... some of the other issues with development ... you mentioned traffic ...

[Romaine]

Traffic to me is one of the main issues, because the streets are the original narrow eighteenth century streets. Broadway is wider, but that's because there was a market there. And Fells Point is a point, it's a peninsula, two peninsulas in fact. The only way you can get out of Fells Point is by going north. You can't go east, you can't go west, you can't go south because it's all water. Therefore the only way for people in these new developments to move in and out of the community is on the north-south streets. And I don't think that those streets are going to be able to handle the thousands of cars which are going to be generated by the new development. The Allied lot, all of which has to come into the community, is going to be a minimum of 3,500 cars onto Caroline Street, which now has the 750 car garage that serves the Bond Street Wharf, and a 350 car garage which serves the Whitman Requardt Building. And this is all new, this has nothing to do with existing

residential traffic. And there will be the new condominiums and the new apartments all going up Caroline Street. I think people are going to be trapped down here with their cars.

[Jacquie]

So when you have nightmares about the future of Fells Point, what things do you see?

[Romaine]

When I have a nightmare about the future of Fells Point I see all the traffic going up little, tiny Wolf Street from that side, because as I said before the developments there ... Henderson's Wharf is already developed and the wharf behind it with the town houses and all, and the Cannery. So we have now completely blocked that off with the new Henderson's Wharf, Swan's Wharf, Union Wharf, and O'Cyrus. And I have visions of these cars all jammed ... if one car, one car gets a flat tire on Wolf Street everything stops. It's a narrow street, and so these people are paying 5, 6, 700,000 dollars for condos and town houses, and they are going to pay major taxes, so if they can't get in and out comfortably from their homes, they're going to begin screaming to get the roads widened. And the city is going to say gee these people are paying big taxes. Those guys in the little historic houses are not paying that much in taxes. We're going to tear down the historic houses and widen the road. That's my nightmare. And there won't be anything left of the historic district. We'll have big roads.

[02:04:23;16]

[Diana]

Back to square one.

[Jacquie]

So is the city doing anything about ...

[Romaine]

Well, I think the city is finally ... we've been testifying to this for a number of years now. We get up and we say we want comprehensive planning – because all of these new projects have been reviewed just by themselves – no relationship to anything that's near them. And whether they comply with the original urban renewal ordinance, and whether the variances in density and height that they're asking sound good. Well, they might sound good if that was the only development on Wolf Street, but if they are competing with all these other developments, it's just completely out of hand, as far as I'm concerned. And the new Planning Director did meet with two people from the community and they showed him the figures that we have been putting together now for three years, and getting up at the hearings and saying did you know, and they'll say, "We're just reviewing this one property..." But he, for the first time, has said, "Has anybody really added these figures up?" And I think we're beginning to make a dent.

[Jacquie]

But it sounds like you've been hammering away at this, bits and pieces for years and years. What caused you to do that ... and why?

[Romaine]

Why am I doing ... Well, you sound like my husband, you know, "Why? You don't even live down there." I just see it as an extremely important asset to the city, and it's a rare survival. For me, I've been in decorative arts and architecture, and to destroy Fells Point would be like taking an axe to a gorgeous highboy, you know. It's just very valuable, very delicate, very fragile, and extremely important to our cultural heritage. And sometimes people ... I think that the people now who live in Fells Point after we formed the Fells Point Task Force and all, are beginning to realize how important their community is and how easily it can be destroyed. And we do have a good backing, but it just bothered me tremendously that this important thing was not being properly taken care of or properly valued by the city. They valued in terms of the fact that people came down here and went to the bars and that it was a thriving restaurant bar district. But as we talked before that's beginning to diminish, because there's bars in Canton now that they can go to. There'll be fancy restaurants in Inner Harbor East. What Fells Point has is its original waterfront, original street pattern, and its fabric of eighteenth and nineteenth century buildings. And that should be honored, respected, preserved. You can't replace it, you can build another high-rise, but you can't replace the historic district.

[Jacquie]

So, to sum up where we are in development, we've got waterfront access, we've got just parking, we've got traffic, and it sounds like going along with that is the threat and the temptation to chop away at more of the community...

[Romaine]

To widen roads, and for new development, which is very disturbing.

[Jacquie]

Any other kind of aspect of development that you...

[Romaine]

Yes, the aspect that has been talked about in other cities... And that is that the new development, although my contact in the Planning Department said no one ever expected it to be on the level of luxury that it is. The new development ... the cost of the apartments and the town houses and so forth, is going to impact the community. And taxes will go up, and the nice old residents whether they are working class households or the musicians and the artists and the young people who came in here to get good housing through sweat equity, they are all going to be driven out by the higher taxes. And we are going to lose what I think is one of the most interesting parts of Fells Point, which is the interesting cross section of people who live here, and who communicate and intermingle with each other, making a real village, a real community. It's going to disappear. We're going to become a place where wealthy people rent condos, buy condos, rent apartments. It's not going to have the real human aspect that it has now.

[02:09:21;08]

[Jacquie]

Diana, you were talking a bit about Philadelphia and some other places, and what development had done there. Do you want to talk about that?

[Diana]

Well, it's just like ... well, Philadelphia, the waterfront, there isn't anything like Harbor Place or Fells Point left in Philadelphia that I know of because that darn road goes all the way around. It's on sort of both sides of the river, so nobody benefits from it...

[Romaine]

No. They made their mistake in the sixties and the seventies when they let the road go through.

[Jacquie]

Yeah, according to Bob Eney that was like the big negative example for Fells Point...

[Romaine]

And Boston...

[Diana]

And Boston. Boston's roadways are a mess, but I don't know Boston well enough to know how ... But in Philadelphia, along the river there seems to be ... there's a major highway either side of the river that nobody has access to. I don't think you can even walk across the bridge because you've got to go ...

[Romaine]

Well, they've put some bridges over it now. Pedestrian bridges to the ...

[Jacquie]

Do you have any additional thoughts that Romaine hasn't ...

[Diana]

Well, I think that there are some young ones ... I know I just found out that a young doctor at Hopkins has moved down to Fells Point because she lost her car in Isabelle. She parked it on the street. She said if I'd put it in the garage ... I don't know whether she's at Henderson's Wharf or where she is. But if you get ... can tap into the enthusiasm of these new residents like that... who are doers, and I don't know how many are professional people who are working up at Hopkins, because, you know, theoretically she could walk to work.

[Jacquie]

Yeah, I was kind of repeating your thoughts about, you know, everybody's fears that it will drive off the diversity by escalating prices.

[Diana]

It will.

[02:11:24;22]

[Jacquie]

The one thing that one person said to me about was he thought that the people that would actually come down here to live were probably self-selecting to the unusual people, even if they were people that could afford the higher prices just because, you know your average person that wants a nice comfortable house is going to go to the suburbs. They're not going to put up with everything that is Fells Point...

[Romaine]

Except those who love the water, and want their boat nearby. That's a big attraction – to be able to walk out your front door and step in to your boat.

[Jacquie]

Now are there plans to add a lot of docking space too?

[Romaine]

Yes, they call them marinas.

[Jacquie]

Okay. Where?

[Romaine]

Well, first of all there's a lot of them over by Henderson's Wharf. And there will be additional ones on Swan's Wharf and Union Wharf. And I don't know if Henderson's going to add any more, because they are doing town houses and parking for the marinas. But the ones that are actually in the plans so far are, Henderson's, Union, and Swan's Wharf – they all have marinas.

[Jacquie]

Some of the people we've talked to have talked about how narrow the harbor is when we look at it from a big picture, and how it could be easily filled up.

[Romaine]

Some of the marinas are going way out into the water. And all of them haven't come to light yet because of another problem, which I'm very concerned about, and I think that the long term development issue is invisible at this time. Because less than 10% of the proposed development has actually taken place. And the new development is obviously going to have many more marinas that we don't know about. We're only at this point talking about what the land use is.

[Jacquie]

So there's a new harbor Master Plan that's come out that's supposed to provide some guidance isn't there?

[Romaine]

Yes, I'm not as familiar with it as I would like to be...

[Jacquie]

I've seen a couple of articles in the Sun about it, that's all I know.

[Romaine]

I've been focusing on the land development, but yes, they have been making some regulation on that aspect.

[Diana]

I do know that about three years ago on the first good sailing day on the Chesapeake Bay that you could practically walk from boat to boat to boat to boat, from the western shore to the eastern shore.

[Jacquie]

In the whole Bay?

[Diana]

In the bay. The Bay is getting full. It's traffic...

[Jacquie]

Because I remember one Fourth of July I think it was that you could do that out here almost.

[Romaine]

Yes.

[Diana]

Well, that's happening to the Bay.

[Jacquie]

Do you have any thoughts about the importance of the working waterfront, whether that is actually going to be reality for long?

[Romaine]

I hope it is, lets put it that way. I don't ... money drives out lesser, I shouldn't say lesser uses, but uses that aren't as profitable as the residential properties and the marinas. I hope that the working boats stay. I think they add a lot to Fells Point. And there is a plan for the Recreation Pier – we don't know which one they are going to accept, but at least one of them involves keeping the tugboats there. But then other people say that as the high-end residential goes in that people are not going to be happy with the tugboats coming and going because of the noise that they make. So some of this is going to unfold in the future.

[Jacquie]

Uh huh.

[Diana]

I would say probably the tugboats will lose out...

[Romaine]

And go to another area.

[Diana]

And Fells Point will definitely lose a lot of flavor.

[Romaine]

There's many places the tugboats can go further down the harbor where there isn't the residential development and still meet their obligations. There'll be a change and whether we're going to be able to absorb all of this I don't know. I think we can absorb the ten or fifteen rehab townhouse developments that are going up. I'm concerned about the high rises on the waterfront. Whether...

[Diana]

I agree, that's definitely...

[02:16:06;07]

[Romaine]

And if people aren't happy with these expensive apartments, they're going to move on to another community, and we've seen that happen in Baltimore before. Some of our best nineteenth century communities, as soon as the density came, and the war, people just packed up and moved. The most dangerous neighbor to have, as far as I'm concerned, is the person who can afford to move without selling the property that they own. Because they then convert it into some kind of money making venture, whether it's lots of apartments or retail stores, or, and so forth, and they move on.

[Jacquie]

Okay we're about to run out of tape ...

[Romaine]

And the ordinary person is left there, who can't afford to move without selling, to experience, sometimes really devastating impact, by conversion of property.

[Jacquie]

What kind of impact? I mean what ...

[Diana]

High taxes, we see this in Anne Arundel county all along the waterfront. The watermen are being pushed out. The retirees are being pushed out. People are buying little tiny houses and they are tearing them down and putting up a palace, you know, it looks ridiculous.

[Romaine]

But that's one type of it, but the other type is, a good example would be what happened on Eutaw Place. Those people moved to the suburbs, they were part of our wealthiest community, put some times twenty and thirty apartments in what was their single family house. And there weren't enough services, it just didn't work. And they were substandard apartments because they were just trying to find a use for a piece of property they didn't want anymore, and ...

[Diana]

Density went up.

[Romaine]

Density went up.

[Diana]

That's bad.

[Romaine]

Services went down.

[Jacquie]

And what happened to the community then?

[Romaine]

It became as a lot of West Baltimore did, the community of vacant houses.

[Jacquie]

Okay, so it just became deserted.