

CHAPTER 2

The First Board of Public Works and the Mania for Internal Improvements: 1825-1850

The year 1825 was pivotal for the state. It marked the end of one era and the beginning of another. A legislature in which intersectional jealousies had stalemated internal improvement projects suddenly decided that there was no need to pick and choose among competing pork barrels; the state, for its greater advantage, would help to finance them all.

It was a fateful undertaking. The state marched proudly and resolutely into what it thought would be economic paradise. The paradise, however, turned out to be a quagmire, and, as Napoleon learned in Russia, the retreat was a great deal more difficult and costly than the advance. The state began its effort in the customary manner, with fixed subscriptions to the capital stock in several ventures; but as some of these ventures—in particular the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Company—sank deeper and deeper into the fiscal quagmire, the state, in a continuous rescue mission, marched right with them until it, too, was over its head in debt.

The legislature embarked on this course in its 1825 session, which produced two significant bills—one that inaugurated the state as financier of ambitious improvement projects and a second that created the first Board of Public Works to superintend those projects.

The act creating the board stated in its preamble the legislative purpose:

It is the opinion of this General Assembly, that the prosperity of this state would be quickened and better assured by the creation of a board of public works, whose duty it shall be to form and propose plans of internal improvement by means of roads and canals; to superintend the execution of such, as the legislature may approve and authorize; to devise and suggest the ways and means necessary to complete the same; and generally to take under their care and control the stock or property which this state does and may possess in these improvements.¹

The board as constituted by the General Assembly consisted of the governor, as its president, and eight other named individuals who, in the event of a vacancy, were to be replaced by appointment of the governor and the Council concurrently. Its duties were singularly directed at developing plans for various works of internal improvements, including specific canal projects, and superintending the construction and financing of those improvements. Section 3 of the act required the board:

1. to "cause those parts of the territory of this State and the District of Columbia, which shall lie upon or contiguous to the probable courses and ranges for a

1. Acts of 1825, ch. 166.