

Preface

A history of the Maryland Board of Public Works was originally undertaken at the request of the Task Force to Study the Functions of the Board of Public Works, which was created in 1976 by a joint resolution of the Maryland General Assembly. The paper was to be an appendix to the task force's report.

It soon became evident, however, that an adequate treatment of this subject could not be done in that context. The history of the board (and its precursors) is so intertwined with the political, economic, and fiscal history of the state, from a time even predating the Revolution, that a look at the board only in its current framework would have been a sterile, incomplete, and therefore nearly worthless undertaking.

The Board of Public Works is the highest administrative body in the Maryland state government. Consisting of the governor, the comptroller, and the treasurer, it now derives its ultimate authority from the state Constitution and is responsible for the expenditure of all capital appropriations and the superintendence of nearly all state public works projects. Each year it deals with hundreds of millions of dollars; yet, until recently, it also was required to approve extensions of sick leave for state employees as well as their out-of-state travel.

There has never before been a published history of the Maryland Board of Public Works. Few people, except those who have served on the board or regularly dealt with it, have even the most cursory understanding of its functions and operations, much less its history and antecedents. It is for this reason that a complete and definitive history of the board is desirable—not merely as a scholarly exercise but to provide some insights into the nature of the board and the functions it serves.

The Board of Public Works, as currently constituted, was first created by the Maryland Constitution of 1864. It was not the first such board, however; nor is it what the delegates to the 1864 or 1867 Constitutional Conventions had in mind. Indeed, it is the marked variations in duties and functions committed to the board and its precursors over the past 150 years that make the history interesting.

By way of summary, the first Board of Public Works was created by the General Assembly in 1825. If the legislature was the board's mother, its father was the insatiable appetite for getting the state involved in "works of internal improvements," for making every major river and stream in the state navigable, and for connecting the principal waterways by digging canals of various lengths and sizes. The sole function of this early board, which remained in existence for only three years, was to feed that appetite by looking around the state for potential improvement projects.

The second board was created, after rancorous debate, by the Maryland Constitution of 1851. Its function was quite different. The state had had its fill of internal