

In 1817, the state authorized the drawing of a plat (known as "Poppleton's Plat") of all existing Baltimore streets along with representation of any necessary street improvements. The municipality was empowered to execute any of the improvements noted on the plat, provided two-thirds of those who were to have property condemned for a project approved. In 1836, and again in 1839, the legislature transferred general condemnation power to the municipal government. To make the most of this authority, the municipality in 1841 created a Board of Commissioners for Opening Streets. This body was to perform all the duties associated with obtaining property for street improvements, including preparation of plats, public notifications, and assessment of benefits and damages.

An attempt to streamline the city's government led to the abolition of this board in 1861 and transfer of its responsibilities to the Appeal Tax Court (RG5). After five years, however, the board was re-established.

The work of the board greatly increased beginning in the 1880s, primarily because bond issues such as the "Five Million Loan" of 1882 and the "Six Million Loan" of 1892 provided large sums for street improvement. The 1888 annexation also expanded the number of streets requiring attention. From 1904 to 1907 the board devoted most of its efforts to acquiring property for widening streets in the area burned by the 1904 fire. During the 1920s, the agency's activities reached a zenith after the municipality acquired hundreds of new streets through the 1918 annexation.

No significant changes have been made regarding the process of improving streets during this century, but administrative responsibility for the process has changed. The 1946 city charter did away with the Board of Commissioners for Opening Streets and placed its duties in a Department of Assessments. In 1975, an authority over street properties was placed in the Department of Public Works (RG47), where it remains today.

Records Summary

Records for street improvement relate primarily to the legal process of acquiring property. A significant amount of detail is provided for each improvement project covered. Other topics described in the records are financial accounts, street planning, and the 1904 fire. Opening and closing streets books, minutes, permits, and legal documents are the most abundant record types.

Series

1. Opening and Closing Streets Books. 1828-1924, 1953-74. 115 lin. ft. (1113 vols.). Street name index. Arranged in rough chronological order.
2. Minutes. 1905-13. 1 lin. ft. (9 vols.). Arranged chronologically.