
BARRON'S WHARF

The First Test of the Bill of Rights

For within one year last past, many parts of Our Wharves have been filled up with sand and dirt from four to six feet. We apprehend, and fear, that if the City Commissioners continue digging ditches to alter the Water Course . . . that Our Wharves will be useless to us, and intirely ruined.

Letter of Hezekiah Waters, April 2, 1817

America at the dawn of the nineteenth century was an awakening economic power. The continental nation, unexplored and unexploited, offered limitless possibilities for young men with courage and foresight.

Such a hardy soul was John Barron. Scion of an old and established Baltimore family, Barron in 1815 joined with John Craig to purchase a dock and warehouse on the Fell's Point harbor front of Baltimore. Until 1800, Annapolis had been the major city of Maryland and the surrounding area, but as shipping had grown, its harbor had lacked the depth to accommodate the ever greater clipper ships and trade carriers. A valuable prize was to be had by the person or persons who could find safe harbor for the traders of the central states.

Fell's Point on the east side of the Baltimore harbor seemed to be an ideal site. It was deep and well protected on the Patapsco River, sheltered behind the promontory of Fort McHenry from both storm and hostile invaders—an important consideration, as the burning of Washington, D.C., in the War of 1812 was still a vivid memory. Moreover, Fell's Point had a long and successful maritime history of its own. The first cruisers of the navy of the "Thirteen United Colonies" had been fitted out there in 1775. On January 24, 1777, the Fell's Point shipyard of George Wells, at Thames and Bond streets, had delivered the *Virginia*, a frigate of 28 guns and the first ship built for the Continental navy.¹

It is not surprising, then, that Craig and Barron had been attracted to the fistlike peninsula of Fell's Point. There, each day, tall sailing ships,