CHAPTER 1

An Overview of Early Policies: To 1825

Maryland's first Board of Public Works was created in 1825 by the General Assembly. Such a board had been proposed at least as early as 1819, but the idea took six years to win legislative favor. Three factors contributed to the ultimate creation of the board. Most directly, it was the state's growing interest in and infatuation with "works of internal improvements"—a network of roads, canals, and river improvements designed to open efficient trade routes to the West—that prompted the legislature to establish the board. The role of this board was not to limit these ventures, financed increasingly with state funds, but to search out opportunities for new ones.

A secondary factor, which helped to spur this drive for internal improvements, was the desire to run the state government without the need for direct taxation—to finance its limited operations through income derived from state investments in corporations chartered by the legislature. This aspect of fiscal policy—a predominant one for many years—provided an independent incentive for the state to make these considerable investments, to assume the role of capitalist.

Finally, the organic law in effect at the time made the legislature the dominant branch of state government. The governor had little political or executive power and thus could provide no real check on legislative frolics or ventures. There was no fiscal coordination. This, in the end, permitted the unwarranted generosity with state money that eventually rendered the state insolvent.

This chapter will discuss these conditions or developments in reverse order, from the colonial period to the eve of the board's creation.

The first Constitution of Maryland was adopted in 1776. It provided for (1) a bicameral General Assembly, consisting of a House of Delegates elected annually and a Senate chosen every five years by a senatorial electoral college; (2) a governor elected annually by joint ballot of the General Assembly for a one-year term, whose incumbency was limited to three years; (3) a five-member Council to the governor, also elected annually by the General Assembly; and (4) a treasurer of the Eastern Shore, a treasurer of the Western Shore, and commissioners of the loan office, all appointed by the House of Delegates and serving at its pleasure.

The governor under this system had no independent political base and was virtually subservient to the legislature. He had no veto power over legislation but was required, perfunctorily, to sign whatever bills were passed by the General Assembly.