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The Baltimore Sun Jacques Kelly column: JFX is a long stretch of history

Posted on: Sat, 07 Feb 2009 09:52:00 EST

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Feb 07, 2009 (The Baltimore Sun - McClatchy-Tribune Information Services via COMTEX) -- GV | Quote | Chart | News | PowerRating -- The date on the highway bridge over the Jones Falls said 1961, a year that is as good as any to pin an age on the expressway that runs from downtown to the Beltway. A few weeks ago an old friend, June Goldfield, posed a basic question: What is the history of the almighty Jones Falls Expressway?

The expressway is a mostly elevated automobile highway that more or less took off where the old Fallsway ended. The Fallsway was the public works darling of Mayor James H. Preston. It was a piece of engineering infrastructure that channeled and covered over the Jones Falls watercourse with an elevated highway in much of downtown, thus putting an end to deadly overflows. That Fallsway was constructed from about 1911 to 1916. Then Baltimore rested for 40 more years before getting busy again.

By the mid-1950s, our civic progressives, who then still had downtown offices, were anxious to get to their homes in Baltimore County more quickly. They complained of a 45-minute commute. Other cities were building big roads. Why not slow-poke Baltimore?

In 1955, the Greater Baltimore Committee made a priority of highway construction along the Jones Falls Valley and blew the trumpets loudly to get it built. A sleepy City Council complied. (The original route had been suggested by New York City parks and bridges czar Robert Moses.)

The then-flourishing Pennsylvania Railroad had a double set of tracks in the valley, but railroads were on the decline, and highways were in the ascendancy. A stalwart band of rail commuters hammered away at the railroad to keep its service open, but the Pennsy had its way and won the right to discontinue its commuter trains in 1959. Tellingly, Mayor Thomas J. D'Alesandro Jr. had broken ground for the road Oct. 2, 1956.

As a child, I watched the wreckers tear out the gorgeous bridges over the Jones Falls Valley at Calvert and St. Paul streets. These were the city's design prizes of the 1870s, but by the style-conscious 1950s, they looked like the wrong kind of antiques. Today we would make them landmarks. Also bulldozed was the magnificent Mount Royal pumping station and chunks of Mount Royal Terrace. I was also in the audience the day the spindly Belvedere Avenue (later Northern Parkway) bridge was pulled down over the stream and railroad tracks.

There was also talk of making commuter bus lines on the highway, but Baltimore was always a wretched mass transit city. No bus lanes. There was also a failed movement to create a park along the Jones Falls Valley as the road was built. Instead, the builders piped sections of the stream through huge concrete conduits. Architect

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George Kostritsky, who envisioned the park, complained in a news article the highway had been planned "in a vacuum."

The highway opened from Biddle Street on the south to the Beltway Nov. 2, 1962. Mayor J. Harold Grady cut the ribbon, along with Gov. J. Millard Tawes. They talked of traveling its 10 miles in 15 minutes. That event was not judged to be of any news value. The Sun's eight-sentence account of the expressway's opening was buried inside the paper. It ran above the [television listing](#) for Bozo the Clown, Captain Kangaroo, The Alvin Show, and Shari Lewis and Lamb Chop.

Find previous Jacques Kelly columns at baltimoresun.com/kelly

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