French Market Celebrates 200th Anniversary
City Master Plan Hearings in May
FRENCH MARKET CELEBRATES 200TH ANNIVERSARY
by John Magill
Assistant Curator
Historic New Orleans Collection

Ed Note: The Preservation Resource Center is pleased to present the following photograph essay on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the French Market. Special thanks is due to John Magill and the Historic New Orleans Collection for making this possible.

1779 — The Spanish authorities ordered the construction of an enclosed market to prevent the continued exposure of food to the elements at the established outdoor riverfront market.

1782 — The market was completed at the corner of Chartres and Dumaine Streets.

1788 — The market was destroyed in the great fire that consumed most of New Orleans.

1791 — A new market was completed along the river side of the levee between St. Ann and Dumaine Streets on the approximate site of the present French Market.

1808-1809 — The market was replaced by the Cabildo and Presbytere or Halle des Bouchers. Designed by Arcene LaCarriere Latour and Barthelmy Lafon, it was 300 feet long and forty-nine feet wide. It had 104 columns and consisted of three alleyways, each of which was designated for either meats or produce.

1812 — A severe hurricane on August 19-20 destroyed the market. A temporary structure was built on the site.

1813 — A new market based upon the plans of Guite Jr. and Guilhot was built on the site. Built of brick plastered over to resemble stone, the building was 302 feet long and forty-seven feet wide. Now greatly altered, it still stands as part of the French Market complex.

1821 — Artist John James Audubon, living in New Orleans, regularly visited the wild bird and game sellers at the market to purchase specimens for his paintings.

1821-1822 — Brick sidewalk paving proved unsatisfactory, and was replaced by stone paving. The eight foot wide sidewalks were expanded to twelve feet.

1823 — A shed like vegetable market was built on the square bounded by St. Philip, Decatur, Ursuline and North Peters Streets. It shared the square with Benjamin Latrobe’s

"...the market house...is usually furnished with beef, pork, some mullard and veal; fish of several sorts in abundance, and cheap; wild ducks and other game in season; tame turkeys, fowls, ducks, and geese; and vegetables of all kinds during the whole year."

Major Amos Stockard / 1812

View of the Plea Market from the Jackson Brewery as it appears today. Visible are the additions, including the New Red Store, made between 1973 and 1975. Photo by Jon White Brantley and Robert S. Brantley. Their latest book, New Orleans: Then & Now is under consideration by a major publisher.

During the Civil War, Union soldiers traded rations which were in short supply, for fruit and vegetables which were readily available but expensive at the markets. Courtesy The Historic New Orleans Collection/Museum/Research Center Acc. No. 1974.25.20.25

A common site throughout the French Market was Choccutta Indians who sold herbs and other products. They were seen sitting quietly on the steps or lying on the flagstone. Courtesy The Historic New Orleans Collection/Museum/Research Center Acc. No. 1974.25.20.58
waterworks built between 1813 and 1820. The roof of the vegetable market was rebuilt in 1830 eliminating the pediments.

1833 — Manuel Simon Cacallu and Christoval G. de Armas built the Red Store on North Peters between St. Philip and Dumaine streets. Space was rented to dry goods dealers.

1835 — The vacant space, or “neutral ground,” between the meat market and Red Store was set aside by the city for black and Indian traders.

1840 — A fish and wild game market was built next to the vegetable market on the site of Latrobe’s water works which had been torn down in 1838.

1840 — Fire severely damaged the Red Store which was repaired and rebuilt in 1841.

1847 — The meat market was beautified with the installation of new French green blinds. The pillars were painted ox-blood, and the cornice was painted white.

1847 — A new waterworks was built on the triangle bounded by Decatur, North Peters and St. Philip Streets opposite the vegetable market.

1853 — The waterworks was closed and the building was adapted for use as a fruit market. Previously fruit had to be sold from shelves attached to the fence around Jackson Square.

1861 — The city ordered sidewalk vendors to pay rent. To avoid this the vendors moved to the “neutral ground,” although the area was reserved for non-whites.

1862 — Union Commandant Benjamin Butler, in attempting to eliminate yellow fever, ordered the cleaning of all New Orleans markets which were in filthy condition.

1866 — To organize the mob of vendors in the “neutral ground,” the city ordered the area be leased to a person who would build a dry goods market.

1870 — The Bazaar Market, devoted to dry goods, was built on the “neutral ground.” It was an iron structure 180 feet long by eighty-eight feet. Designed by black architect Joseph Abelinard. Topped by three tin

“Along the levee...were ranged two rows of market people, some having stalls, or tables with a tilt or awning of canvas, or a parcel of palmetto leaves. The articles to be sold were not more various than the sellers... I cannot suppose that my eye took in less than 500 sellers and buyers, all of whom appeared to strain their voices, to exceed each other in loudness...”

Benjamin H. Latrobe / 1819

A view in the French Market around 1905. To the left is Decatur Street while the fruit and vegetable markets are in the distance. Courtesy The Historic New Orleans Collection Museum/Research Center Acc. No. 1974.25.20.30

“The creoles...go to Mass and also go to the Market, which, on Sunday morning, is more crowded, more noisy, and fuller of negro and creole gaiety than on any weekday.”

Dr. Thomas D. Nichols / 1845

“...there were not only pure old Indian Americans, and the Spanish, French, English, Celtic and African, but nearly all possible mixed varieties of these and no doubt of some other breeds of mankind.”

Frederick Law Olmsted / 1853
“...the portions of where the yellow fever usually raged...usually originated in the immediate vicinity of the French Market. I rode around and examined the French Market and a number of other localities... they were simply astonishingly filthy with rotting matter. In the French market the stall women were accustomed to drop on the floor... all the refuse made in cleaning their birds, meat and fish.”

Benjamin F. Butler / 1862

cupolas for ventilation, it was the only French Market building so decorated.

1915 — The Hurricane of September 29 caused severe damage. The Bazar Market collapsed and had to be removed.

1936-1937 — A major renovation of the market was undertaken by the WPA and the city of New Orleans. The market had fallen into disrepair, and several buildings including the Red Store were demolished. A new Bazar Market was built, for retail produce. A whole sale seafood was built behind it cupolas and columns were added to the Butcher Market and the market columns side of the vegetable market was demolished to widen the street. A new Farmen Market was built between Ursuline and Barracks Streets. New refrigeration and sanitation systems updated the sale of meat and fish.

1953 — Floodwall constructed separating market from river.

1973-1975 — A major renovation by the French Market Corporation beautified the French Market. The focus of the market changes from a wholesale food distribution center to that of shops and restaurants. The produce market was limited to the Farmer’s Market and a Bev market was established soon after. The Red Store was rebuilt a few feet from its original site, and a new building replaced the wholesale fish market.

1984-1986 — Pedestrian improvements to Dutch Alley including new gates in floodwalls, performance rent, sculpture and interpretive exhibits.

1986 — Improvements and expansion continue with additions to Dutch Alley. Renovation Phase II of the Farmers’ and Flea Market and the installation of floodwall gates to the riverfront.

1988 — Land is donated for the Riverfront Streetcar line which opens as a link between the French Market and Canal Street.

1991 — As the French Market prepares to celebrate its 200th Anniversary renovation of the Farmers/Flea Market enters a new phase.

“In gazing upon the scene, one can readily imagine himself in some city beyond the seas... Then there are the flowers... all these are to be had in the market for a sum so small that one can hardly believe his senses.”

Scribner’s / 1873

The St. Roch Market, St. Claude Avenue between Marais and Muskie Streets, was built in the 18th century and still operates as a market. When originally built the Market was not enclosed, but was marked by stalls within an open space. Photo by Susan Gaudelius.

“The confusion of tongues in the market, it was simply delicious. French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and ‘Gombo’ contended with each other for supremacy; but French predominated.”

George Augustus Sala / 1880
"The old Halle des Bouchers... looked extraordinarily like a primitive Greek temple... the nineteenth century half enclosed the arcades with bathroom tiles, without thereby increasing the cleanliness, half screened them with wire, to accumulate more dirt. A more progressive twentieth century proposes to demolish it altogether and replace it by something not less sightly and a little more sanitary... the proposed change is resisted by all who remember it in some happier, romantic stage before the war, when Chocaw women sold herbs and sassafras bark from grasswoven baskets and Negresses in tropically chignon-dispensed hot drip coffee..."

John Peale Bishop / 1936

"From the ceiling hang endless ropes of spider's webs, numberless flies, and incalculable dirt... the floor of the market is not at all clean... Through the crowd lurk some skeleton dogs, vainly hoping, by some happy accident, to secure a dainty morsel."

Historical Sketch Book and Guide to New Orleans and Environs / 1885

The urban areas and growth directions of modern cities can often be loosely gauged by the locations of shopping centers indicating that retail business both local and national is moving. The establishment of public markets in New Orleans during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can provide some image of the Crescent City's growth, and a map of New Orleans showing only public markets at a particular time gives one a rough, yet fairly accurate impression of where Orleansians flocked at the time. New Orleans grew primarily apricots during the nineteenth century which is revealed by the number of apricot markets. Between the 1830s, when the first market after the French Market was built, and 1880, ten public markets were in use (as mentioned only three were built during the period below Esquivers Fields, and another three were in the "back-of-town." In both of these areas urbanization was much closer to occur than uptown. Just as small shopping centers cluster around large regional malls today, neighborhood businesses often opened around the public markets in New Orleans. This resulted in the growth of a number of thriving small local business districts. Many of these commercial areas can still be found about New Orleans, although the old market buildings may have long ago lost their original purpose, or vanished.

Orleanians in the Times-Picayune / 1975