



By Jay Gibb

The following history was prepared for the Library of Congress.

The Soulard Farmer's Market is the last survivor of once numerous public markets in St. Louis. A combination of good location, grit, and city subsidies kept this market viable long after the others had ceased. But before discussing the particular history of Soulard Market, it would help to place the phenomenon of public marketing in the context of human history.

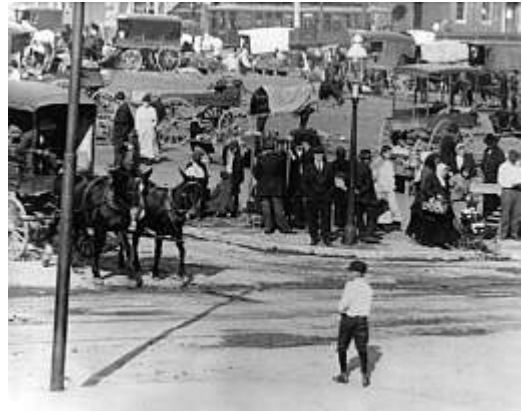
Origin of Public Markets

At one time in human history, each individual was responsible for hunting and gathering his own food. Later, early efforts at farming developed: purposely planting crops and raising animals in close by, accessible places, rather than foraging near and far. Later still, humans developed specialization in their food-raising tasks, and some areas were better suited for growing certain grains, or for raising certain animals, than other spots. This specialization created the necessity for the owners of various foodstuffs to barter for the foods they didn't have.

As towns developed, situated near key water and food sources, some people forsook raising their own food entirely, instead depending on trade for their daily bread. As towns grew larger, a spot was customarily set aside in the center of the settlement as the trading and bartering location for everyone. Over the generations, these trading spots grew more established and structures were even specifically built for the trading of goods. The Greeks and the Romans provided space in their town and city plans for market spaces, often in a central square. This pattern has persisted through the centuries in human societies until the very recent phenomenon of suburban-style planning.

Public Markets in Old St. Louis

Soulard Market is today a lone survivor, but was once only one among many markets in the city. Space for the city's first market was set aside by Pierre LaCledé in his 1764 plan for the new village. He followed the ancient tradition by reserving a whole square block just above the river in the middle of the town. That block was at first an open field, and later boasted a succession of market structures. This first market site survived in various capacities for almost a century; downtown's Market Street is a reminder of its existence.



A busy morning at Soulard Market, circa 1890. The view is looking northwest from the corner of 8th and Julia Streets (the street names are visible on the gas lamp globe). The streetcar tracks run along 8th Street.

As the original village center became a business zone and residential areas spread outward, the citizens called for new market sites. The city

Swekosky Photo Collection, School Sisters of Notre Dame.

built two: North Market in 1832 at Broadway and Lucas, a.k.a. "Mound Market"; and South Market in 1839, at Broadway just south of Chouteau, a.k.a. "French Market".

Others were built by private groups. Included were Lucas Market (1845) at Twelfth and St. Charles Sts., Biddle Market (1857) at Broadway and Biddle Sts., and Union Market (1868) at Broadway and Sixth Sts. There were a number of others, but I think you get the idea.

All these markets apparently thrived for varying lengths of time, then succumbed as better-located facilities took advantage of shifting residential patterns. Only a few of these surviving even lasted to the 20th century, and the last, Union Market, closed in the 1980's.

Soulard Market, Finally

Soulard Farmer's Market was created when Julia Cerre Soulard donated two undeveloped half-blocks of her real estate to the city of St. Louis in the year 1838. Her instructions dictated that the donated property be used as a public marketplace in perpetuity, lest it be reclaimed by her heirs.

One can look at this donation in two ways. Was the land donation the act of an incredibly generous city benefactor? Or was it a calculated move by a shrewd businesswoman to increase the value of her surrounding, adjacent land, just conveniently surveyed into building lots? Certainly a public market was a nice selling point for lots in her 2nd Addition (1838) and 3rd Addition (1840), the land which today forms the north-of-Geyer-Avenue portion of the Soulard Neighborhood.

What About 1779?

This ascribed date of our Market's founding is a fantasy, with no basis in historical fact. In 1779, the village of St. Louis was a walled fortress nearly a mile away from this unadorned spot amongst the town's Common Fields. The villagers led hard, busy lives, and hardly had time to illogically walk a mile out into the wilderness to buy or barter food, when a thriving, well-established Market Square stood just blocks away in the center of town! (This 1779 date is much like the story of a young George Washington chopping down a cherry tree and then not lying about it when asked. These myths resonate with us, they sound good, but they never happened, sorry.) Every historic account indicated that Soulard Market was founded in 1838, and did not exist in any form earlier.



Local farm family with customers on typical Saturday at the Market.

Photo by Deborah Franke.

The Early Years

Soulard Market's early days as a venue were quite humble and lean. The aforementioned, nearby French Market provided formidable, and at first, better-located competition. At first the new market remained as two undeveloped blocks of land, surrounded by a slowly increasing number of new row houses, tenements, and businesses. As the number of nearby customers increased, Soulard Market's fortunes improved accordingly.

In 1843 (or 1848 depending on which historic account you believe) Soulard Market's first structure was built. It was not built by the city, which you'll recall has just built the French Market in 1839. Rather, a private corporation was set up by some of the farmers/vendors, the group sold shares, and with the proceeds built a one story red brick building on the eastern of the two half blocks. The new building's handsome east facade boasted four columns and a pediment roof in the fashionable Greek Revival style, the intended effect to emote permanence and stability.

The new interior stalls were meant for the vendors of meats and other highly perishable products in that age before refrigeration. Of course any vendor willing to pay the somewhat higher stall rental fee was welcome to come inside. The majority of the farmers chose to continue to sell outside, right off the ends of their wagons. The corporation sold the building to the city in 1854. In 1865 a second story was built by the same corporation over the midriff of the long narrow market building. The upstairs was a sparkling new meeting hall. The city purchased

this improvement in 1867, and the physical plant remained relatively unchanged for the next three decades.

The Whirls and Swirls of History

Most of Soulard Market's history was peaceful, but there were exceptional moments. The 1850's were a violent decade by 19th century standards; many bad feelings were generated by the festering issues of slavery and states' rights.

In St. Louis, the burgeoning German immigrant population sided fervently with the abolitionist North, while most of the Americans and French were Southern sympathizers. During mayoral election day in April 1852, some German men began preventing, by the threat of bodily harm, the presumed opposition from voting at the Soulard Market polling place.

Word quickly spread of this action, which enraged the American population. A mob of 5,000 Americans moved through the streets that afternoon toward the market. They were greeted by fists, rocks, brickbats, and even gunshots, but 200 or so of the Americans broke through and seized the Soulard Market poll with shouts of "Free suffrage!". The violence lasted into the night; persons were killed and a nearby tavern was set ablaze.

During the Civil War years, the local military commander declared martial law throughout the city. The grounds of Soulard Market were pressed into duty as a military encampment of pro-Union, German homeguards, charged with enforcing martial law. There were no incidents at the Market during the war.

In 1877 the upstairs hall became quarters of the (Presbyterian) Soulard Market Mission. This was one of several religious missions which located themselves on the near south side area, offering spiritual and sociological services to the German, Czech, Slovak, Croatian, and Lebanese immigrants. The mission's services proved invaluable: one 19th century Police chief declared, "The restraining influence of the Soulard Market Mission is worth one hundred policemen a year to that part of the city." The mission remained at Soulard Market until mid 1896, when storm damage forced the group to build a new facility at Menard and Julia Street, a building which still stands today as renovated office space.

The Winds of Change

In late May 1896 a tornado tore through south St. Louis in a west-to-east swath between Park Avenue and Russell Boulevard. Thousands of structures were damaged and hundreds were killed. The wind heavily damaged the 1840's Soulard Market building, completely smashing the two-story section. Contrary to local legend, though, the whole structure was not destroyed by the storm. The building

was repaired again, but minus the upstairs hall, and is plainly visible in the several 20th century photos.

In 1899, a hay, coal, and wood market was established in a new shed just south of the old building. These commodities had always been available thereabouts, now it was merely more organized.

By 1905 just three farmers markets were left in the city. The 1904 World's Fair had stirred the local imagination to a wondrous future of efficiency and invention, and farmers' markets were now looked upon as reminders of a romanticized past. One article referred to, "The simple life at Soulard Market, a little square where the customs of old St. Louis are preserved." But to the local population, the market continued to be a vital source of inexpensive foodstuffs, and fashionable thought be darned.

Area Improvements

The next stage of the Market's history occurred around 1909-11, as the "City Beautiful" urban planning movement took hold of Saint Louis. The thought was that the civilizing effect of parks, greenspace, and community facilities would influence for the better the alarmingly bad behavior of the immigrant lower classes, such as those folks living in "the older wards".

The City Beautiful movement transformed the area around Soulard Market. The other two half-blocks just south of Julia Soulard's donation were earmarked as the site for a new park.

Dozens of crowded, pre-Civil War row houses and tenements were condemned, seized, and razed, allowing for some open space. A new library, partially financed by steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, was built just across from the new park space. A public bath stood across 7th Street from the market; now even more than before, the Market area served as a focal point for the surrounding neighborhoods. (By the way, Pontiac Park, seven blocks south of the Market was also a City Beautiful creation, but that project is a whole other story.)

In spring 1911 a revival celebration was held to commemorate all these improvements. And in subsequent years, various promotional parades and other events were hosted to draw additional business. In the 1920's only two public

Soulard Market, 730 Carroll Street, St. Louis, Missouri 63104 (314) 622-4180



Famous widely published view of Soulard Market, circa 1919. The old market building still stood then, as well as now several sheds. The small flounder building at right was the Market master's office, apparently. The large crowd is attracted to a brass band playing on a temporary bandstand, center. Notice the rutted, dirt streets and the smoky pall in the air. The event in progress was an annual springcelebration.

Courtesy of Soulard Market.

markets remained in the city. Their function was still important for both vendors and customers, but was bucking a societal obsession with cleanliness and purity. A 1919 photo shows the messy vitality of the place.

A Whole New Building

In the mid 1920's the city proposed an \$87 million bond issue for public improvements throughout the city. A Christmas tree of projects promised something for everyone, and the voters approved the levy. One of the many proposals was for a new, cleaner, modern Soulard Market building.

The 1840's building and later shed pavilions were all razed to make way for the deluxe new facility, and construction began in 1928. The new structure's two-block-long exterior design mimicked the circa 1419 Brunelleschi Foundling Hospital in Florence, Italy, the total cost, \$267,000. The new building was designed to bring all the vendors under one roof for the first time, making the cleanliness people happy. A central two-story section built over Eighth Street boasted an upstairs gymnasium/all-purpose hall. It was flanked by 4 one-block-long wings, two on each side. The impressive new facility was dedicated May 8-9, 1929, in gala festivities attended by 20,000.

During the *Great Depression* and *World War II*, the market boomed and the new building served well. The inexpensive produce found there kept many a family fed, even during wartime rationing.

Neighborhood in Decline, and Comeback

Following the war, the surrounding neighborhoods resumed a gradual emptying out process which had begun 20 years before but which had slowed. Now the trend picked up speed rapidly. In 1947 the city responded to the trend by publishing a citywide redevelopment plan which called for the demolition of the entire area around Soulard Market, dunning the area as "obsolete and non conforming". The market was to be spared from this wholesale razing, and in 1952 the path of the new Interregional Highway was also routed to avoid nearby large businesses and the market. The Market held its own even as the surrounding area descended into slum conditions. Despite the enveloping decay, the customers kept coming, many now arriving by car from other neighborhoods and from the suburban county.

In the 1970's the neighborhood had reached its nadir, and began a long comeback. During this time improvements were designed and partially executed on the park: a new playground was built, along with a new bricked plaza in front of the main Market entrance, where until then 8th Street ran right up to the columned portico.