



# From Poydras Market to “South Market District:”

## FOOD RETAIL IN NEW ORLEANS’ CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA  
TULANE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE

**NEW ORLEANS DURING THE 1830s** saw its population more than double, to over 100,000, as migrants predominantly from Ireland, Germany and the northeastern United States made their way to the banks of the lower Mississippi. Increasingly, the human geography of the city shifted away from the largely Francophone lower city and toward the predominantly Anglophone upriver precincts of the Faubourg St. Mary (now the Central Business District and “South Market District”) as well as the neighborhoods we now call the Warehouse District, Lower Garden District, Central City and Irish Channel.

As the population shifted, so did food retail. The buying and selling of foodstuffs took a number of forms in this era, both lawful and illicit. Peddlers were ubiquitous: Benjamin Latrobe reported in 1819 that “in every street during the whole day black women are met, carrying baskets upon their heads calling at the doors of houses.” Hunters and fishermen, meanwhile, would sell their catch on the canal docks and by the riverfront. Along the uptown wharf, flatboatmen would earn the wrath of licensed merchants by turning their rafts into illegal pop-ups, selling wholesale to retail consumers. “The owners of the flat-boats no sooner arrive,” growled one businessman in 1847, “than they open their floating shops for the sale of their respective cargoes; and as their prices average little more than one-half of those [in] stores[,] there are always numbers of customers thronging the levee....” Corn, wheat, smoked hams, barrel pork and other up-country exports typically sold along the flatboat wharf.

For most New Orleanians most of the time, “making groceries” meant a trip to the neighborhood market. These open-stall bazaars were owned and operated by the city such that inspectors could enforce sanitary regulations and collect fees from a centralized space. The French (Creole) Market was the first and largest unit, dating originally to 1780-1791 and expanded to four blocks by the early 1800s.

To outside eyes, the market was among the most interesting spectacles of the city, and travelers regularly commented on the scenes they saw. Basil Hall, who came from Edinburgh in 1828, noted that “the fishermen were talking Spanish,” likely Isleños from St. Bernard Parish, “while amongst the rest... was a pretty equal distribution of French and English.” His inventory imparts an idea of the city’s foodways at the time: “cabbages, peas, beet-roots, artichokes, French beans, radishes... potatoes both of the sweet and Irish kind;—tomatoes, rice, Indian corn, ginger, blackberries, roses and violets, oranges, bananas, apples;—fowls tied in threes by the leg, quails, gingerbread, beer in bottles, and salt fish....” He noticed at “every second or third pillar sat one or more black women, chattering in French, selling coffee and chocolate [and] smok-

ing dishes of rice.... I found it was called gumbo, a sort of gelatinous vegetable soup, of which...I learnt afterwards to understand the value.”

The urban expansion of the 1830s forced authorities to create new food retail spaces in new areas, particularly uptown. What resulted was a municipal market system which, over the next 80 years, would form one of the largest in the nation.

The first to serve the upper faubourgs was the St. Mary’s Market (1836), located off Tchoupitoulas Street, directly across from the Preservation Resource Center’s office. “For quite a number of years after its erection,” noted J. Curtis Waldo in his 1879 *Illustrated Visitors’ Guide to New Orleans*, St. Mary’s Market “was considered very far up town.” Because of the ethnic predominance of this area, some people jokingly called the emporium “the Irish French Market.”

Two years later, the city acquired space from the Carrollton Railroad Company on Poydras Street for a market to serve what at the time would have been the rear of the Second Municipality. Known as the Poydras Market (1838), the two-block-long building ran in the middle of an extra-wide section of Poydras Street from Penn to South Rampart. It offered every conceivable foodstuff and household goods via hundreds of open stalls, all under a pavilion-like roof with a picturesque wooden cupola. The gables of the structure were finished in ornate detailing, and a passageway beneath the cupola allowed mule-drawn drayage and (later) streetcars to move beneath the structure.

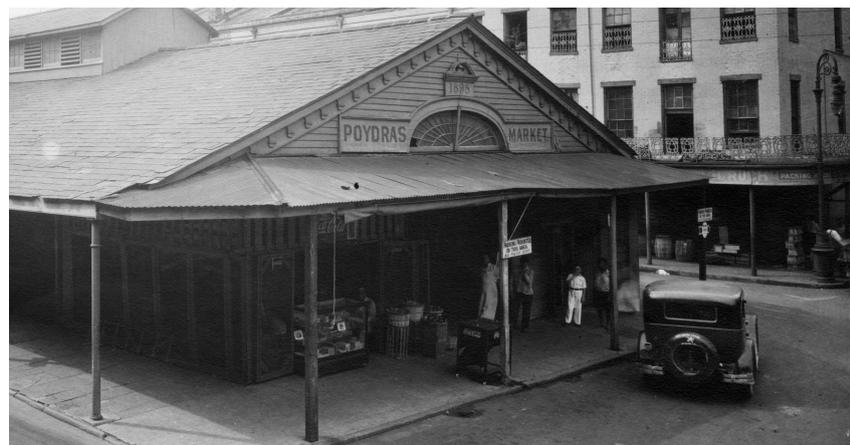
Markets in the antebellum era were owned by the city, sold by stall



**ABOVE:** Detail of a 1922 aerial photo of the Pille and Poydras market pavilions in the middle of Poydras Street at upper left; note the present-day LePavilion Hotel at upper center. Courtesy The Historic New Orleans Collection, accession number 1979.325.6421  
**TOP:** Earliest photographic view of the Poydras Market, captured by Marshal Dunham in 1864-1865, courtesy LSU Library.



**ABOVE:** A view under the cupola of the Poydras Market taken by famed Western photographer William Henry Jackson in the 1890s, courtesy Library of Congress. **TOP AND BOTTOM RIGHT:** Poydras Market in the 1920s, courtesy Library of Congress.



(rather than leased) to vendors, controlled by ordinances, and managed by a market commissary, who oversaw regulations regarding sanitation, suppliers, stall keepers, deliveries, and the building itself. Records indicate the Poydras Market kept its commissary busy: according to an 1858 *Daily Picayune* report, the emporium was “intolerably filthy, from the want of facilities for obtaining water,” which left the public “often disgusted at the uncleanness,” not to mention “so crowded as to be almost impassable” in the section “devoted to the sale of vegetable, coffee and refreshments.”

The area around the Poydras Market made matters worse. Markets in general tended to attract loiterers and vagrants, and nearby Dryades Street, which was called Phillippa at the time, bore witness to a remarkable concentration of saloons and brothels — and along with them all the affiliated scams and crimes. Worse yet, a few blocks upriver was a sketchy purlieu known as “the Swamp,” a notorious lair where flatboatmen debauched. The delinquency sometimes found its way into the market proper: in 1860, for example, an unemployed woman lingering around the bazaar, likely a prostitute, exchanged words with what she described to the *Daily Delta* as “a beautiful looking man with a gold watch around his neck.” She ended up getting shot in the abdomen by him.

Mostly, however, ordinary law-abiding people patronized the marketplaces for their everyday sustenance, and found an abundance of fresh victuals amid well-arranged stalls. Despite its problems, the Poydras Market prospered to the point that in May 1866, the City purchased the adjacent neutral ground from South Rampart to Basin (now Loyola) to create the Pile Market, to relieve overcrowding in the original pavilion. A reorganization of the market system in 1868 occasioned the selling of stands and stalls to a new set of owners — although many proprietors both before and after the change subleased their spaces, a source of constant dispute at the time. Renovations in 1898 included more permanent walls between outdoor and indoor space, and the installation of a long rooftop monitor for ventilation.

By the late 1800s, source regions of immigration to New Orleans had shifted to southern and eastern Europe. Among them were Orthodox Jewish families from Russia and Poland, some of whom would find work at the Poydras Market. Because Dryades Street ran through the market and accessed the 325-stall Dryades Market (1849) a mile uptown, both emporia would become central to the residential settlement and economic ascendancy of this population. Into the 1960s, Dryades Street would be known as New Orleans’ “Jewish neighborhood,” and while this ethnic enclave is mostly traceable to commercial opportunities on Dryades Street (now Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard), the connection originated with the Poydras Market.

In 1911, New Orleans’ municipal market system added its thirty-fourth unit, double the number from 1880 and over ten-fold since the establishment of the Poydras Market. The city at the time boasted the highest per-capita number of public markets in the nation, and possibly the largest ab-

solute number as well.

It was an apex that would not last. Municipal markets grew increasingly ill-suited for twentieth-century city life, as corner grocery stores offered convenient alternatives and as populations moved into new automobile-based subdivisions. The rise of supermarkets after World War II sealed the fate of the system, and by the 1960s it was reduced to its original member: the French Market.

Vendors did not go down without a fight. They formed merchants’ associations, developed competitive strategies, and lobbied authorities for facility improvements. But the city had other designs: in 1927, the St. Louis-based firm Bartholomew and Associates, consulting for the recently formed City Planning Commission, identified Poydras Street’s “present width of 74’ (as) hardly sufficient to meet the demands of trucking” and recommended broadening it to 100 feet along its downtown flank. The extra-wide section occupied by the Poydras Market, which the planners scorned as an obstructing relic, provided an idea of how a widened Poydras Street might improve traffic flow and help modernize downtown. Bartholomew’s emphasis on trucking pointed to the fact that Poydras Street, first laid out in 1788, had long been something of a blue-collar cousin to Canal Street, attracting wholesalers, shippers, warehousing and light industry. It was the sort of environment that planners ached to “improve,” and Step One was the removal of the Poydras Market.

In January 1930, the Dryades-to-Penn section of the 92-year-old pavilion was torn down explicitly to make more street space for vehicular traffic. Two years later, the city officially abandoned the market because it “was no longer needed and it constitutes a serious traffic hazard.” The remaining structure was unceremoniously cleared away in June 1932; Dryades was later renamed O’Keefe, and both it and Poydras were widened in the 1950s and 1960s for precisely the reasons identified in 1927 by Bartholomew: traffic efficiency.

No trace of the Poydras Market survives today, but there some clues. For one, the former home of famed Maylie’s Restaurant, founded in 1876 by two market workers and in business for 110 years, remains standing and now hosts an Irish pub. Across the street at 900 Poydras are three surviving antebellum storehouses, the likes of which once surrounded the Poydras Market. And a few blocks upriver is a booming new mixed-use neighborhood centered around the Rouse’s Market which opened in 2011. Developers christened this area with the neologism “South Market District,” meaning south of the old Poydras Market.

No one called it that during 1838-1932, but if the name catches on, so too will endure the memory of the Poydras Market.

**RICHARD CAMPANELLA**, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture and a Monroe Fellow with Tulane’s New Orleans Center for the Gulf South, is the author of *Bourbon Street: A History, Bienville’s Dilemma, Lincoln in New Orleans*, and other books. He may be reached at richcampanella.com, rcampane@tulane.edu, or @nolacampanella.