

Market Forces

New Orleans' Old Public Markets

Spawned Clusters of Commerce Still Visible Today

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Poydras Market, c1864, from LSU Library Marshal Dunham Collection

Participants in the upcoming New Orleans Entrepreneur Week will likely speak of “entrepreneurial ecosystems,” a term implying the various factors needed to grow start-ups into sustainable enterprises. Among them are capital, diverse skillsets, a client pool, key infrastructure or facilities, and apt government policies.

What yokes them together is geography—that is, the factors all need to intersect within a certain place. Silicon Valley in California and Research Triangle in North Carolina are examples at the regional level. Many larger cities have their own entrepreneurial hotspots, be they trendy downtown districts or suburban office parks, where start-ups tend to cluster to their mutual benefit.

New Orleanians may draw inspiration from a fascinating aspect of local culture that catalyzed similar clusters in times past, and endure today in transmuted form. It was New Orleans’ system of public food markets.

Think of any present-day commercial cluster within the city’s historic districts, and it likely originated around a now-gone public market.

The system was borne in the late 1700s in response to public health concerns. Hunters and farmers would sell to townspeople under the blazing sun, while peddlers plied victuals openly in the streets and fishmongers set up in what is now Jackson Square. Foodstuffs often spoiled before reaching the table.

The Spanish Cabildo (city government) understood that centralizing food retail would allow for both sanitary inspections as well as taxation. According to Cabildo records from September 10, 1784, officials “decided to construct a market large enough to accommodate all the daily food supplies [to] protect them from the bad weather and excessive heat...as well as from the heavy rains and extreme cold weather.... This public market should be centrally located.”

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In 1791, officials remodeled this early provisional structure into an enclosed stall market where now stands Café du Monde. Later known as the French Market, the emporium expanded in 1799 with a fish market, in the 1820s with a fruit and vegetable market, in 1840 with a wild game market, and later with a bazaar (dry goods) market.

New Orleans' first public market became a must-see for visitors. "The French Market is one of the most lively and picturesque scenes of New Orleans," wrote Swedish traveler Fredrika Bremer in 1851. "One feels as if transported at once to a great Paris *marché* (except) that one here meets with various races of people, hears many different languages spoken, and sees the productions of various zones. Here are English, Irish, Germans, French, Spanish, Mexicans.... Most (who sell) are black Creoles, or natives, who have the French animation and gayety, who speak French fluently, (while) on the outskirts of the market you found Indians."

From the perspective of the city, public markets brought in revenue, through license fees and stall leases, and made inspection and sanitation easier thanks to centralization. From the perspective of vendors, the markets minimized overhead costs, such that stalls rented far cheaper than storefronts. Vendors didn't need much start-up capital, nor special skills—just a supply chain and a strong work ethic. They didn't even need to speak the predominant language; pidgin sufficed. Market workers rarely went hungry, around all that food, and affordable housing could usually be found nearby, as just about every neighborhood would eventually get a public market.

The 1830s saw the first big expansion. What is now the Warehouse District got the St. Mary Market, between North and South Diamond Streets, while the present-day CBD got the Poydras Market in the neutral ground of 1000 Poydras.

The Faubourg Tremé had its 350-foot-long Tremé Market on Orleans Street, and the Faubourg Marigny and present-day Bywater got the Port and Washington Markets. In 1849, the Dryades Market opened at the present-day intersection of Oretha Castle Haley at Martin Luther King Boulevard, serving a vicinity that later got the Keller, 2nd Street, and Mehle Markets. Magazine Street formed a veritable corridor of food emporia, with markets named Magazine, 9th Street, Jefferson, and Ewing, while nearby Prytania Street and Carrollton had their own eponymous emporia. Algiers had two, St. John and Foto, and the high-population neighborhoods of the lower wards had a dozen public markets.

By the early 1900s, wrote UNO geographer Robert Sauder in a 1981 article, New Orleans "operated more public markets than any city in the country and continued to operate them later than most other cities." Sauder's map of the 34 public markets in 1911 reflected the population distribution of the city at the time. As such, markets became neighborhood icons and had an architecture to match, with stately facades and picturesque cupolas.



Treme Market in 1922; Army Air Corps (detail)

Because ethnic geography varied citywide, some markets became associated with certain groups. The "French" or "Creole" Market gained its name for its many French Creole vendors—until Sicilian immigrants came to dominate in the late 1800s, leading to the nickname "Italian Market." The St. Mary Market was known as "the Irish French Market," and the Dryades Market had many Orthodox Jewish vendors.

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French Market in the 1890s, when it was dominated by Sicilian vendors. Library of Congress

Visitor Nathaniel H. Bishop witnessed this diversity during an 1876 visit to the French Market, where he noted “the Sicilian fruit-seller with his native dialect; the brisk French madame with her dainty stall; the mild-eyed Louisiana Indian woman with her sack of gumbo(;); the fish-dealer with (an) odd patois; the dark-haired creole lady(;); the old Spanish gentleman with the blood of Castile tingling in his veins, (and) the Hebrew woman with her dark eyes and rich olive complexion.”

Public markets spawned entrepreneurial ecosystems because the foot traffic they generated made adjacent streets ideal for businesses, be they barber shops, shoe repair, retailers, coffee stands (how Morning Call and Café du Monde got their start), or restaurants (such as Tujaque’s and Maylie’s).

All that cash flow captured the attention of bankers, who also set up shop adjacently. “Branches Near All the Principal Markets,” boasted the Commercial-Germana Trust and Savings Bank in *Daily Picayune* ads from 1908, as it listed its French Market Branch, Tremé Market Branch, Poydras Market Branch, Magazine Market Branch, and Ninth Street Market Branch. Bank co-locations brought capital and professional employment to the clusters, which in turn attracted additional economic activity—all of which injected ever more “energy” into the “ecosystem.”

The resulting economic rigor may be viewed as an example of the creative force of free-market capitalism. But there are some ironies here. The public markets were just that—government-owned—and their success derived from anything but privately private machinations. “The city,” as Sauder pointed out, “had a virtual monopoly on food distribution,” thanks to regulations of its own making, which gave “consumers who lived in the vicinity of the public markets...little alternative but to shop in them.” That is, the very policy that spawned so many business opportunities did so by curtailing other opportunities—specifically those in private food retail.

Only when private enterprise started to make inroads into the government-controlled food-retail scene did the whole “ecosystem” phenomenon start to falter—or rather, change forms. That began to happen at the turn of the twentieth century, as new technologies in ice-making and refrigeration, followed by new ordinances, allowed competition to arise in the form of the famous corner grocery.

Because of their ubiquity and convenience, corner grocery stores began to out-compete public markets; indeed, many of their owners, typically Sicilians, got their start running market stalls. The city fought back in 1901 by

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prohibiting groceries to open within nine blocks of a public market. This rule enabled one final expansion of the market system, which peaked in 1911. But with the concurrent rise of automobiles and parking needs, the quaint old public markets became increasingly inadequate to feed the expanding population.

Consumer needs and expectations also changed. Corner groceries found themselves competing with larger “super” markets, some of which became regional franchises like Canal Villere and Schwegmann’s, and eventually gave way to national chains like Winn-Dixie or Walmart. Each had ever-greater supply and distribution systems, and their economies of scale enabled lower prices with greater variety.

The larger the supermarkets, the more they depended on efficient deliveries by large trucks—which drove them to locate near major automobile arteries, rather than within walking distance of neighbors. Now residents had to drive to make groceries, while those without cars would soon find themselves in “food deserts.”

By the late 1950s only a handful of public markets remained, and in 1973, the French Market, the last city food emporium, largely shifted to a festival-marketplace format. Nearly two centuries after its inception, New Orleans’ public market system, once the most extensive in the nation, became a memory.

And yet it still affects our lives today. Next time you go up Magazine Street, note those four commercial clusters set amid residential neighborhoods. Each corresponds precisely to an old market location—and in all four cases, the former market structures still stand, at 1911, 3138, 4301, and 5500 Magazine.

Likewise, that Mid-City business cluster (including Venezio’s and Braccato’s) originated from the former Maestri Market, whose edifice (now a mattress store) also still stands. So too the shops along 2500 Bayou Road, traceable to the old LeBreton Market, whose pavilion-like building is still across the street.

Orleans Avenue at North Claiborne is a busy commercial intersection because of the old Treme Market, and the stretch of Claiborne from Tulane to St. Bernard Avenue had upwards of 300 small businesses in part because public markets anchored both ends. The former St. Bernard Circle Market still stands, as does a 1930s replacement of the 1830s Treme Market, at 1508 Orleans Avenue.

Similar commercial zones may be found around the sites of the still-standing former markets of Keller (1802 Magnolia), Zengel (840 Piety), and St. Roch (2381 St. Claude Avenue), the last of which came back to life as a private food court in 2015. The old Carrollton Market (700 Dublin) and Prytania Market (between Lyons and Upperline) are long gone, but their bustle endures in the business clusters they spawned.

Times have changed, and the factors that once germinated entrepreneurial ecosystems may not work today. But there are some themes worth noting. Both the private and public sector play roles in fostering entrepreneurship. Food brings people together. Reducing overhead costs lowers entry barriers and increases profit margins. Diversity and accessibility are key. Proximity generates foot traffic, which in turn invigorates cash flow—that is to say, geography matters.

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