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“WE AREN’T BUDGING”: FARMERS MARKETS, URBAN RENEWAL, AND FOOD  
ACCESS IN WASHINGTON, D.C. FROM THE 1960S TO 1970S

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## Abstract

Farmers markets played an integral role in D.C. food access through the 1970s, particularly following supermarket flight. In the wake of affordable and accessible sources of food, low-income and largely BIPOC D.C. residents sought out alternative methods of food distribution such as markets to make up the difference. At the same time, District officials sought to convert the land farmers markets inhabited to more tax-intensive purposes, and many of the original sites were designated as part of urban renewal areas. The closure of these historic markets, and the changes undergone by those that remained, sheds an important light on the government's hostile attitude towards markets, particularly those located in predominantly Black neighborhoods of the District. The O Street Market and Municipal Fish Market and Wharf are important case studies in examining this trend. An analysis of these historical D.C. farmers markets during the 1960s and 1970s reveals not just the institutional forces that sought, and often succeeded, to remove markets but also the many ways in which they practiced resilience and offered a source of potential in areas abandoned by supermarkets.

## Introduction

Over the years, the market has been stoutly defended by those who see in it old-fashioned virtues of individuality and direct connection with Mother Earth, has been attacked by those who see in it an unwarranted subsidy of inefficiency in small-scale distribution, is fondly remembered by those who think it no longer exists, and is faithfully patronized by those who prefer the quality of freshness over quantity, or even over price (Pyle 1971, 197).

Food access in the District prior to the proliferation of supermarkets in the 1950s was defined by small mom-and-pop grocery stores, cooperatives, and farmers markets. Farmers markets, also known as public markets, were an important source of food access from the very beginnings of colonial America (Shakow 1981, 69). Most evidence seems to indicate that the

largest and most significant of these early markets in the District<sup>1</sup> was Center Market, which opened as early as 1802 and was located where the National Archives stand today (Plummer 1985, 21). By 1948, there were at least seven markets throughout the District (Wann et al. 1948, 11). The public markets that existed during this time period served as both sources of food products for the consumer as well as for some local grocery stores and restaurants (T. Fisher 1927).

Although public markets held an important role nationwide, they were particularly integrated into the Washington way of life. As one *Washington Star* article put it, “A central public market is needed in Washington more than in most large cities because Washington housekeepers have the marketing habit developed over a period covering practically the entire life of the National Capital” (Kennedy 1926). The source of produce for these markets largely came from farmers in the surrounding states. As such, Maryland and Virginia senators were often heavily involved in debates about the removal or modification of existing markets (“Waterfront Site Proponents Lead in Market Ballot” 1926). However, it’s important to distinguish early public markets from those we picture today, both in sheer scale and the variety of items sold. Center Market, for example, had over 1000 stalls (“Florida Avenue Market Study” 2009, 17). Vegetables were not the only products sold there—meat, poultry, and eggs were also staples of the market vendors.

The longtime survival of District markets was subject to the value of the land they inhabited and the priorities of the Commissioners. The removal of the first significant market occurred in 1931, when Center Market was torn down. It was relocated to make way for the National Archives, among other buildings, located in what is now the Federal Triangle (*The*

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this paper, the District of Columbia refers to areas that were formerly or are currently considered Washington, D.C.

*Washington Post* 1962). Following WWII, markets nationwide struggled to compete with grocery chains, improved transportation and refrigeration, and the loss of nearby farmland to the growing suburbs (Shakow 1981, 69).

Public markets played an integral role in food in the District through the 1970s—though in their later years they were considerably scaled-down. As D.C. began to struggle with food access following supermarket flight, they became an increasingly important dimension of food access. During the 1960s, food access for residents of D.C., particularly in predominantly Black neighborhoods, declined significantly. Between 1968 and 1982, the number of major grocery stores decreased from 91 to 33, following the trend of white flight (Reese 2019, 35). This is despite urgent attempts to retain supermarkets. An article from the *Washington Afro-American* describes a rally to keep an Anacostia Safeway open in 1979 (F. Fisher 1979). The departure of grocery stores can also be attributed to the declining population numbers, felt acutely in Wards 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 (Reese 2019, 37). Wards 7 and 8, predominantly Black, today experience the most acute impacts of grocery store flight. Both also have the lowest average household income (Reese 2019, 47). This was one of the larger factors that led to the formation of what is today called food deserts, or food apartheid neighborhoods.

Food access in the District was also indelibly marked by the uprisings that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968. During the protests that occurred in the week following his death, many businesses were damaged, looted, or destroyed, including both grocery stores and markets. Some businesses also left in the aftermath, though these relocations, as well as the migration of white people and Black middle-class families, had started before the riots occurred (Reese 2019, 34). As Reese argues, “The riots, however, provide an example of how narratives of violence intertwined with Blackness become integral to justifying the

systematic demise of access” (Reese 2019, 34). The uprisings were used as a continued justification for why supermarkets deliberately chose to leave predominantly Black neighborhoods—a narrative of violence and low profitability that failed to fully veil the racism that underlined corporate decision-making. This is despite evidence showing that purchasing power in low-income neighborhoods is commonly underestimated (O’Hara and Toussaint 2021, 3).

The markets that remained held an integral role in the food system. With the closure of many farmers markets and the abundance of supermarkets (albeit largely in the suburbs) also came resulting increases in prices for the consumer. According to Shakow, “By 1970 it was estimated that assembly and distribution accounted for as much as 80 percent of the retail selling price of fruits and vegetables as compared to 25 to 40 percent for retail commodities as a whole” (Shakow 1981, 69). Today, D.C. has the largest number of farmers markets of any city in the U.S. However, prices at these markets are often too expensive for low-income individuals to afford (O’Hara and Toussaint 2021, 2).

As this paper will show, supermarkets were not D.C.’s first or only source of food. In the wake of affordable and accessible sources of food, low-income and largely BIPOC D.C. residents sought out alternative methods of food distribution such as farmers markets to make up the difference—sources of foods that were the rule, rather than the exception, of food in the district during the 19th and early 20th century. An analysis of two historical D.C. farmers markets during the 1960s and 1970s reveals not just the institutional forces that sought, and often succeeded, to remove markets but also the many ways in which they practiced resilience and offered a source of potential in areas abandoned by supermarkets.

## Methods

I conducted qualitative archival research to uncover the role of farmers markets in food access in the District of Columbia from the 1960s to 1970s. This consisted primarily of newspaper articles covering markets from local publications such as *The Washington Star*, *The Washington Afro-American*, and the *Washington Post*. These were derived both from online archives and the People's Archive at Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library. This archive also contained records such as congressional laws and local ordinances, forms pertaining to market participation, business records, pamphlets, newsletters, government reports, press releases, and directories that served to provide background information.

I found the archival method of data collection to be the most appropriate given that there are ample historical records of markets available. I chose to closely examine the O Street Market and Municipal Fish Market and Wharf as case studies because they had well-documented, lengthy histories on their evolution. Some obstacles did arise during research from conflicting accounts regarding the details of market dates and names—not all publications consistently used the same titles for markets or stated their exact locations. By cross-referencing with several different articles and publications, I was able to form a composite of market sites. For questions that remained unanswered, especially in terms of founding dates, I made the uncertainty clear within the paper. The archival research did present certain limitations, in that some communities are not extensively covered by the mainstream press, and the media's own biases and choices of who to cover likely impacted the coverage of markets. I attempted to respond to this challenge by consulting Black newspapers as well as official government sources.

### Municipal Fish Market and Wharf

The District began operating the Municipal Fish Market in 1913. Located off of the Washington Channel, it was accompanied by the nearby Municipal Fish Wharf and another market referred to in news coverage as simply the “Farmers Market” (located at 11th and F Streets SW). The fish market was home to a number of restaurants as well as wholesale and retail vendors (*The Washington Star* 1958). In 1951, the Municipal Fish Wharf and Market were together the most successful of four government-owned markets, earning \$19,582 for the city (*The Washington Post* 1951). This is the equivalent of more than \$230,000 in 2024 (“Inflation Calculator,” n.d.).

Plans to raze the Municipal Fish Market emerged in response to the District’s Southwest renewal plan. A predominantly Black region of D.C., the Southwest was the first significant initiative of the Redevelopment Land Agency (RLA). The RLA was established by Congress in 1945 in an attempt to retain residents, increase tax bases, and prevent deterioration in the District. However, its urban renewal plans largely targeted and decimated Black neighborhoods (Schuyler 2019). The Southwest was almost entirely razed during its renewal, with only 13% of the original population ultimately returning. Those who took the place of the original residents were largely white middle-class individuals. A major component of the renewal project was the construction of the I-395 highway, which not only separated the Southwest from the rest of D.C. but also led to the destruction of the Municipal Fish Market in 1960 (Kacmarcik 2022; Lane 2001).

Because the market was originally established by Congress, razing it also required Congressional approval (*The Washington Star* 1958). Despite assurances from representatives that the fishermen would be given assistance to relocate, this had not come to pass by 1959 (Eisen 1959). An initial amendment that required relocation efforts from the RLA was eventually

withdrawn (*The Washington Post* 1958). Consultants at the time also recommended that the market shouldn't be relocated, as many stalls were not used; instead, the Florida Avenue Market could serve as an alternative for the vendors (*The Washington Star* 1958). As in the case of the O Street Market I describe in the next section, the Florida Avenue Market became an option of last resort. Mitigating the impacts of uprooting the vendors was not considered a priority.

Vendors did not see leaving the area as a viable alternative, and many actively protested until the very last days of the market's existence. The owner of the Stanford's restaurant, Winthrop Stanford, is quoted as saying, "We aren't budging until the Government comes down here and throws us out" (Shumate 1960). After the Southwest renewal project, only a significantly scaled-down presence would still be operating at the Wharf. This reflected a larger trend during the 1960s and 1970s, wherein government officials nationwide made a concerted effort to convert the land farmers markets inhabited to more tax-intensive purposes (Shakow 1981, 69). The District Commissioners in many ways reflected this attitude towards markets, and this was inherently linked to the urban renewal policies of the District.

The over-enforcement of health codes was also used deliberately by city governments to bring about market closures (Shakow 1981, 69). Whether this was an effort consciously undertaken by the District is up to interpretation—but there's no doubt that health regulations were a persistent obstacle for markets. The history of the health code in the District is innately tied to its public markets, as the very first public health legislation was enacted in 1802 to prevent the sale of bad meat in Center Market (Plummer 1985, 21). Starting in 1880, when markets played a more integral role in food access, food inspectors visited the public markets daily (Plummer 1985, 163). Large amounts of produce were often confiscated (Plummer 1985,

162). However, by 1936, shutting down markets was considered a rarity; vendors typically understood and followed the health regulations (Canova 1936).

District farmers markets faced increased scrutiny from health officials once again during the 1960s and 1970s. Starting in 1964, farmers were no longer able to sell food products other than fruits and vegetables in open-air markets (Stafford 1964). If markets did not meet the standards of district officials, they would be denied licenses to sell (Rackley 1971). A 1972 congressional investigation found that inspections had not been “adequate,” leading to ramped up efforts. As a result, at least 700 businesses were closed between 1972 and 1975. Prior to 1972, the average had been about 40 a year (Shaffer 1975). Despite assurances from the health department to the contrary, the perception among vendors at the time was that the District was more interested in eliminating markets than improving health conditions (*The Washington Post* 1960; Saar 1975).

Arbitrary policy differences seemed to exacerbate this notion, especially at the Fish Wharf—what remained of the vendors on the Washington Channel after the market was torn down. When nine stalls were closed at the Fish Wharf in 1975 due to unsanitary conditions, fishermen were still able to sell fish from their vessels because the regulations governing boats fell to a 19th century police law that was not as strict. Despite this, business still fell as the boats had smaller display areas (Shaffer 1975). Merchants were also unable to process seafood in any way (Saar 1975). This discrepancy in D.C. health policy reveals that the purpose behind health code enforcement was not solely altruistic but a purposeful attempt to limit vendors’ ability to sell.

The case of the Municipal Fish Market and Wharf illustrates the District Commissioners’ disregard for the role of the market both as an employer in the Southwest and a source of food.

Despite high reported earnings in 1951, the market was slated for destruction seven years later. Not only were the vendors given little say in the matter, but relocation efforts on the part of the Redevelopment Land Agency were half-hearted at best, despite the urgings of Congress. As a casualty of the Southwest urban renewal, it was only one part of a broader urban plan that decimated the neighborhood. In the 1970s, the Wharf's struggle with the health code continued to illustrate a hostility from the Districts towards the informal economy thriving there.

### O Street Market

The O Street Market, located in the historically Black neighborhood of Shaw, was first built in 1881 (“District of Columbia Inventory of Historic Sites” 2009, 112). It experienced its peak in the 1930s and 1940s but by 1966 had become a part of the larger Shaw Urban Renewal Area (White 1980). Though its closure two years later in 1968 was attributed in part to looting and vandalizing during the riots, the building didn't suffer significant damage. Overcrowding and health violations were also cited as significant reasons (Stevens 1979a). Despite this, most of the press coverage that would follow heavily centered the role of the riots in the market's closure, or even left out contributing factors entirely (O'Neill 1980; Milloy, n.d.). The choice to often omit the role of health code violations reveals an instinct to place blame on the community rather than paying due consideration to the role that the local government may have played. It also brings into question whether the true purpose of health regulation enforcement was not to ensure food safety, but rather criminalize its sale.

As other markets were failing or intentionally shut down, private developers attempted to renovate some of the district's properties, particularly those considered historic in character—this included the O Street Market. In 1974, citizens groups advocated for the market to be torn down

so that much-needed stores could be built in its place (Rippeteau 1974). Ultimately, the RLA sold the market—and the block around it—to a developer named James Adkins. Along with the market itself, he built a mall that included a Giant, a bank, and a pharmacy. At the time, it was the first Giant built in the District in 11 years; Adkins noted that people warned him prior to his success, “Giant would never come back here” (Stevens 1979a).

The market and the new development were met with mixed reactions from the surrounding community. Its initial reception was highly positive, with prominent figures such as Mayor Marion Barry attending opening celebrations (Milloy, n.d.). But in many ways, its construction reflected the problems associated with urban renewal in the District, knowingly targeting the new white population in Shaw at the expense of older vendors (Stevens 1979a). “During its heyday, the crowded, bustling O Street Market was a rundown, southern community center, catering to a mostly black clientele,” a journalist paraphrased of Adkins’ words (Stevens 1979a). Adkins’ attitude towards the past of the market—as both “rundown” yet also a “community center”—reveals both the importance of the original space to the Black community in Shaw as well as how undervalued it was by popular perception.

Adkins did not recreate the market to its original specifications, however. According to one article, most of the vendors Adkins hired were white, with Black employees (O’Neill 1980). The sellers who had previously worked at the market wanted to return but found it difficult to “pay their way”—with outdoor stall rents totalling \$15-20 a day as compared to a maximum of 20 cents a day at the municipally-owned Eastern Market (Stevens 1979a). Though Adkins’ attorney originally said that the small businessmen displaced by urban renewal would be given preference when the stalls were leased, Adkins ended up choosing those experienced in finance for the new property (O’Neill 1980). Houses were also bulldozed to make room for the

development, resulting in lengthy controversy. A planned community partnership with ownership of the Giant did not come to pass (McQueen 1981).

However, Adkins' prioritization of profit and stability over maintaining the original character of the market also reflected the anxieties of a Black business owner's fervent desire for his business to succeed. He handpicked the vendors for the market, all of whom he knew personally. He was also the only person to bid on the land parcel, and had a vision, if failed, of its contributions to the community through partnership. "All you hear about is black business failure after failure. I said, 'It's not going to happen to me,'" Adkins said two years after the market opened, while it struggled financially (McQueen 1981).

For much of the history of the O Street Market, it was considered the only major food shop in the neighborhood (McQueen 1981). After its initial closure, residents of the area were forced to shop at the next-closest market located on Florida Avenue, also known as the Union Terminal Market. Some residents went as far as to move because the distance was too great (Byrd 1977). "Life in the market has been good to the people ever since 1968 when the burning came," a woman identified as Tracy said of the Florida Avenue Market. "There was no place else to go (to buy food)." (Stevens 1979b). The reopening of the O Street Market in 1979, despite its controversies, represented a return of food to the neighborhood. A Washington Post article noted, "For many, the reopening means the return to Shaw of fresh fruits, fish, beef, eggs, poultry, and a variety of other goods" (Milloy, n.d.). These two conflicting ideas of the market—an installation of urban renewal, yet nonetheless a successful attempt to bring a supermarket and farmers market to an area desperately in need of them—are not easily remedied. But they are just one piece of the complex history of D.C. food access.

The case of O Street Market departs from that of the Fish Market in that it was not directly but rather indirectly impacted by the Commissioners' attitudes towards markets. Its sale as a part of a larger urban renewal plan and attitudes towards its redevelopment in many ways reflected a cooptation rather than a continuation of what had existed in its place prior. Although the project was spearheaded by a Black developer, it no longer existed to serve the Black residents of Shaw but became another instrument of urban renewal to appeal to those who had taken their place. At the same time, it brought a food source back into the community, in some ways revitalizing the market's former purpose—illustrating the importance of local markets in the absence of supermarkets.

### Conclusion

The fates of the local food markets described above were just a few examples of how Washington, D.C. was impacted by the urban renewal period of the 1960s to 1970s. Several other notable markets were also challenged by the District during this time period. The Western Market was sold in 1961 because the land was thought to be too valuable (*The Washington Post* 1961). And in 1966, a Congressional act naming the Georgetown Market a historic landmark and public market was staunchly opposed by the Commissioners, who felt markets were too costly (Elder 1966; Bassett 1966). The Florida Avenue market, one of the most integral to food access, was razed in 1966 due to health code violations only to be rebuilt by private developers in 1967 (Stevens 1979b). Many markets also struggled to maintain a profit as they became peripheral to the supermarket, ultimately leading to their closure. The New Center Market closed in 1962, the owners citing yearly losses of \$40,000 (*The Washington Daily News* 1962).

By the early 1980s, farmers markets were increasingly sponsored as a solution to food access, in contrast to the preceding decades. This is particularly true of Mayor Marion Barry's administration, which departed significantly from the attitude of the District Commissioners. One of his initiatives was to establish a farmers market located in a parking lot of RFK Stadium specifically to improve food access. He supported the market not only in name but by providing grants and resources. Effort was made to invite more BIPOC farmers following a report from the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights that illustrated the need for more resources for BIPOC farmers ("Farmers' Market Use Jumps This Year" 1982). One farmers market established in Anacostia in 1984 also achieved an exemption from the Department of Agriculture allowing it to accept food stamps, emphasizing the will to use farmers markets as a way to serve low-income communities. However, newer markets that were established were largely small-scale operations—in parking lots, and impermanent (Morris 1984).

The closure of many of Washington D.C.'s historic markets, and the transformation of those remaining, sheds an important light on the government's hostile attitude towards markets, particularly those located in predominantly Black neighborhoods of D.C. The case of the O Street Market and the Municipal Fish Wharf and Market are far from the only examples of markets that served an important role in the community. Nonetheless, they are important case studies to understand the transition that D.C.'s markets underwent in the 1960s and 1970s.

Both sites were designated as part of urban renewal areas, as the city saw these markets not as valuable assets to the community but as hindrances to a neighborhood that could otherwise attract a more "desirable" white population. Both were also characterized as older, rundown operations. Although the O Street Market was inactive by 1968, the city did not attempt to support a restoration of what once was. The Municipal Fish Market, despite being highly active,

was put in destruction's path to create the version of the waterfront that the Commissioners preferred. That both of these locations were at one time an important source of food and employment to the community did not stop this process from taking place. The fact that the markets had found new manifestations by the 1970s highlights the resiliency of the vendors and customers who had once patronized them, as well as the longevity of their role in providing food in neighborhoods that lacked it.

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