

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

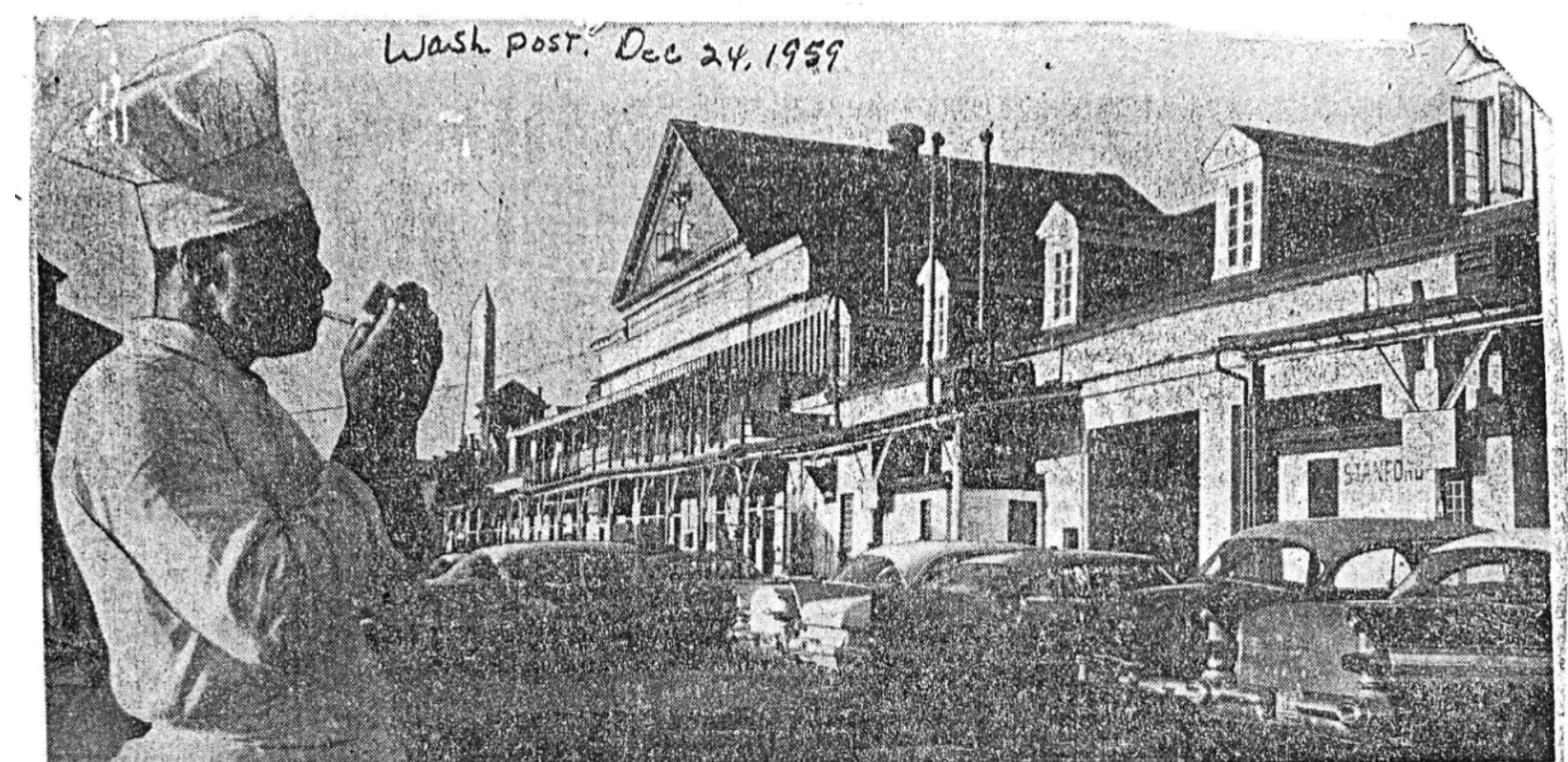


Izzy Wagener

Faculty Mentor: Yuki Kato, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology

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. 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 them but also the many ways in which they practiced resilience and offered a source of potential in areas abandoned by supermarkets.



MUNICIPAL FISH MARKET AND WHARF

- The Municipal Fish Market was located off of the Washington Channel in Southwest D.C., nearby the Municipal Fish Wharf.
- The Southwest was the first significant initiative of the Redevelopment Land Agency (RLA); the RLA’s urban renewal plans largely targeted and decimated Black neighborhoods (Schuyler 2019). A major component of the renewal project was the construction of the I-395 highway, which led to the destruction of the market in 1960 (Kacmarcik 2022; Lane 2001).
- Many vendors actively protested the destruction. After the Southwest renewal project, only a significantly scaled-down presence would still be operating at the Wharf.
- This reflected a larger trend, wherein government officials nationwide sought to convert farmers markets for more tax-intensive purposes. The over-enforcement of health codes was also used deliberately to do so (Shakow 1981, 69).
- When nine stalls at the Wharf were closed in 1975 due to unsanitary conditions, fisherman were still able to sell from their vessels because the policies governing boats fell to a more lax 19th century police law. Despite this, business still fell (Shaffer 1975). This arbitrary discrepancy between laws reveals that the purpose behind health code enforcement was not solely altruistic but a purposeful attempt to limit vendors’ ability to sell.

O STREET MARKET

- The O Street Market, located in the historically Black neighborhood of Shaw, became a part of the larger Shaw Urban Renewal Area in 1966 (White 1980).
- Though its closure 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 followed heavily centered the role of the riots in the market’s closure (O’Neill 1980; Milloy, n.d.). The choice to 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.
- The RLA sold the market property to a developer named James Adkins. The market renovations and the new development that came with it were met with mixed reactions. In many ways, its construction reflected the problems associated with urban renewal, knowingly targeting the new white population in Shaw at the expense of older vendors (Stevens 1979a).
- Adkins did not uphold his commitment to give the small businessmen displaced by urban renewal preference when the stalls were leased (O’Neill 1980).



O STREET MARKET CONTINUED

- However, Adkins’ actions also reflected the anxieties of a Black business owner’s fervent desire for his business to succeed. “All you hear about is black business failure after failure. I said, ‘It’s not going to happen to me,’” Adkins said at the time (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). The reopening of the market in 1979, despite its controversies, represented a return of food to the neighborhood.

CONCLUSION

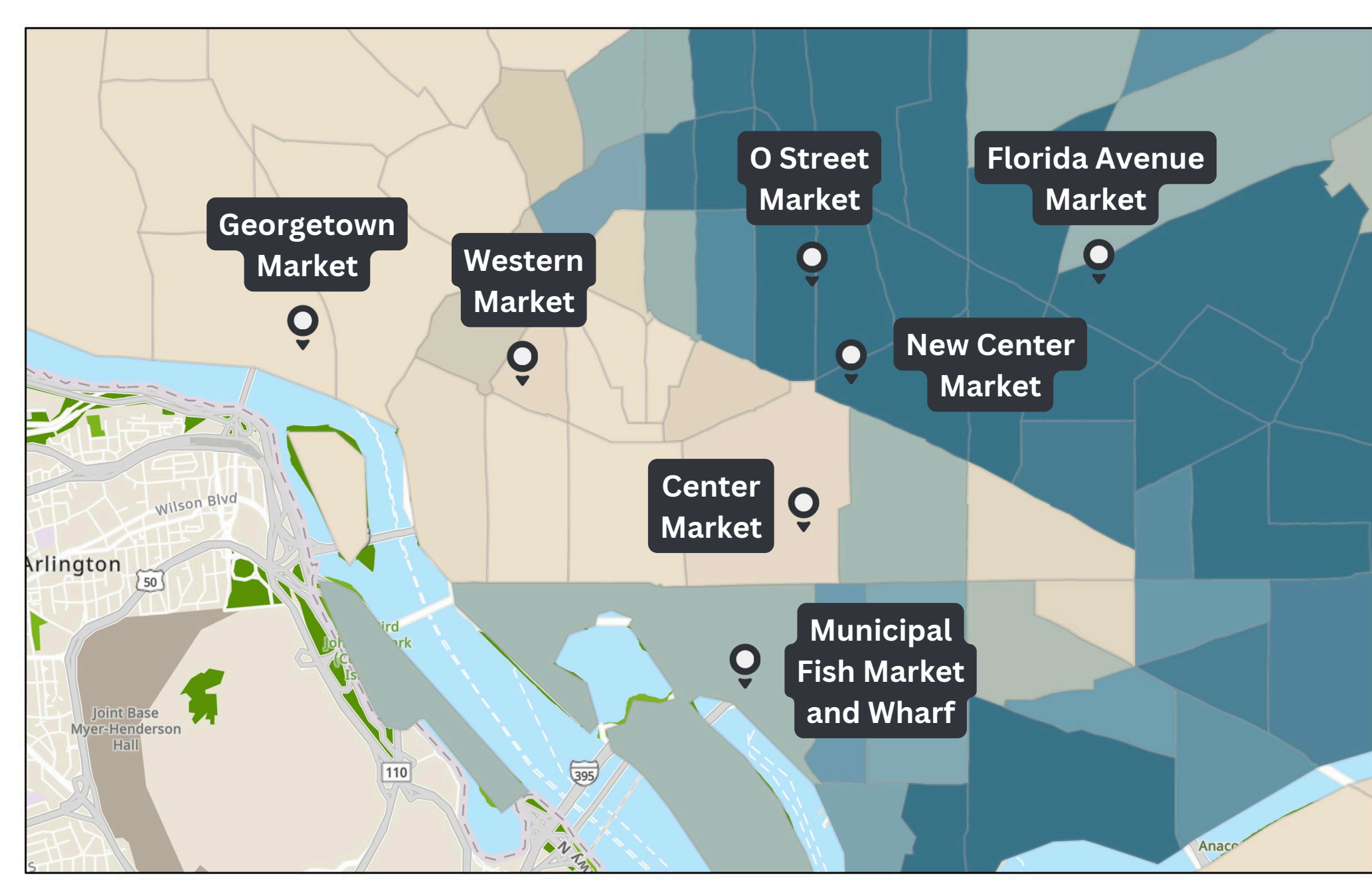
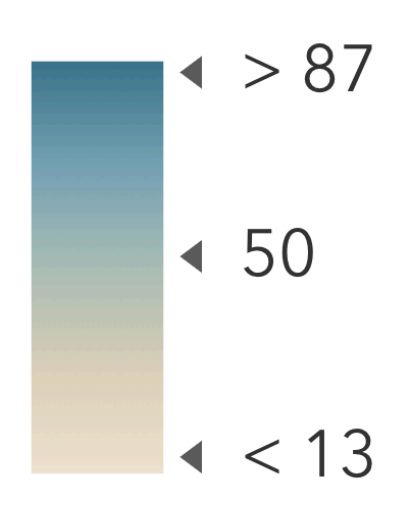
- Along with the two markets described, several others were also challenged by the District during this time period. This was true of the Western Market, closed in 1961, and the Florida Avenue Market, which was razed in 1966 due to health code violations and rebuilt by private developers in 1967 (Stevens 1979b).
- 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.
- Both the O Street Market and Municipal Fish Market and Wharf 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.
- 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.
- 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.

INTRODUCTION

- Food access in the District prior to the growth of supermarkets in the 1950s was defined by small mom-and-pop grocery stores, cooperatives, and farmers markets. However, 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).
- As D.C. began to struggle with food access following supermarket flight, markets became an increasingly important dimension of food access. This was especially true in predominantly Black neighborhoods. Between 1968 and 1982, the number of major grocery stores decreased from 91 to 33, following the trend of white flight (Reese 2019, 35). Wards 7 and 8, predominantly Black, today experience the most acute impacts of grocery store flight (Reese 2019, 47).
- 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 following his death, many businesses were damaged, including both grocery stores and markets. The uprisings were used as a continued justification for why supermarkets deliberately chose to leave predominantly Black neighborhoods.

MAP OF HISTORIC WASHINGTON, D.C. MARKETS

Percent of the 1960 District population that was Black, according to data from the 1960 census tracts



METHODS

- I conducted qualitative archival research consisting of newspaper articles covering markets from local publications such as The Washington Afro-American and the Washington Post. I also consulted records such as congressional laws and local ordinances, business records, government reports, and directories.
- Some obstacles arose during research from the lack of consistency regarding the details of market dates and names. By cross-referencing with several different articles and publications, I was able to form a composite of market sites.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My research would not be possible without the support of the Laidlaw Scholars Foundation and the Georgetown University Laidlaw Scholars Programme. I would especially like to thank Colleen Dougherty from the Georgetown Center for Research & Fellowships and my Principal Investigator Yuki Kato, who mentored me in my first formal research experience. The staff at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library People’s Archive and the Georgetown University Library also provided invaluable resources for my work.

REFERENCES

References are available at the following QR code:

