The Market House

The convenience of a market-house is, to have it long, narrow, and open on all sides, so that the articles may be spread abroad, and the people may have both room and light.

Anne Royall, 1826

Although street vendors offered pedestrians convenient, economical meals or snacks, the main business of the market house was as the primary source of the city’s daily supply of fresh food. Local government made an effort to ensure its success not only with regulations but by carefully considering site, financing, public support, simplicity and flexibility in design, and a location convenient to buyers and sellers. These calculations were intended to reduce risk and speculation, an important factor in the construction of other public buildings like the courthouse or city hall. But no other public building or space demanded such broad consensus and collective action. In this single structure government’s pride and reputation were at stake. Local businesses and nearby property owners depended on its success, as did country producers and street vendors. And it required the approval of the neighborhood. More than any other public building, the market house stood as material evidence of complex decision making that involved many kinds of participants who had reached common ground.1
The Site

Before being built, a market house had to fulfill conditions of accessibility and public support. Local authorities chose publicly owned sites with access to marshes, rivers, roads, and densely populated neighborhoods. The most persistent location of the principal market was the town square or the main thoroughfare, because these were convenient for city dwellers, vendors bringing goods by road or water, and officials responsible for enforcing market laws.2

In some cases the town plan determined the site, as in Charleston, South Carolina, where a 1796 ordinance established a public market on the site “laid out for a market in the original plan of the city, and commonly known by the name of the Beef market.”3 Likewise in Washington, William Thornton and Tristram Dalton, commissioners of public buildings and grounds for the District of Columbia, asked President Jefferson in 1801 for permission to establish a central market on the public reservation designated as market squares on the 1792 L’Enfant Plan. The public reservation was “originally intended for a market [and] is thought to embrace so many advantages, and is so central, that were a market established there, it would be a great accommodation to the City.” Tiber Creek ran through the market squares, giving the area the nickname Marsh Market (fig. 2.1).4

Marshy, low-lying ground was ideal for open-air marketing, since it was likely to be already publicly owned and was of little value to investors and developers. Marshes were also popular dumping grounds before the existence of sewers and incinerators, and local government preferred to locate public markets where nature could do the cleansing. Moreover, farmers and fishermen with small boats could bring their goods directly to the market’s wharves and landings. New York’s Fly Market was near a long, low saltwater marsh along the East River, from Wall Street to Beekman Street. The market got its name from the Dutch word *vlie*, or *vley*, meaning marsh. Farmers from Long Island traveled to Fly Market in wagons and oxcarts that crossed the sound by ferry. Those who lived in New Jersey or neighboring counties along the North and East Rivers brought their goods in skiffs, rowing them with the tides to the market’s riverbanks.5

The New Orleans meat market, built on the natural levee along the Mississippi River in 1813, took advantage of the benefits offered by both streets and water. The French had used the site for open-air marketing, as had the Spanish during the colonial period. The Creole-dominated city government
continued the tradition of using the levee for public purposes, including markets, since the land was publicly owned and near the Place d’Armes, the city’s main square. The market was accessible by boat, and its waterfront location kept the noise, filth, and stench away from the residential area.

Some sites were determined by individuals who donated land to the city in perpetuity provided it be used only for a market. In Frederick, Maryland, in 1785, William Murdoch Beall, Henry McCleary, John Gebhart, and Henry Zealer donated a lot 61 by 80 feet, as well as an alley 12 by 150 feet, to the trustees of the town for a public market. Their gift stipulated that the ground “be used for the purposes of the market, and no other . . . and shall forever remain, free and open for public use.” The terms of these “gifts” varied, as in Baltimore, where legend held that John Eager Howard, a Revolutionary War hero, generously donated land for Lexington Market to the citizens of Baltimore in 1804. In reality, Howard leased the land to the city for ninety-
nine years; annual rent to Howard and his heirs was $228 in gold or silver; and in 1818 the City paid Howard $3,000 for additional parcels of land to extend the market.\(^8\)

Wealthy landowners near growing towns were often beyond the reach of local market laws and held informal markets on their own farms, plantations, and orchards. Local officials tolerated these private endeavors unless they needed more space for public markets. This may have been the case not only in Baltimore but also in St. Louis, where authorities needed more market space and claimed a portion of private property that had evolved informally into an unauthorized marketplace. An ensuing court battle with the wealthy landowner, Antoine Soulard, began in 1804 and was not settled until after his death in 1825. In 1836 the city issued a quit claim deed to Soulard's widow, Julia Cerre Soulard, and in 1838 she deeded to the city the tract of land containing the marketplace. She stipulated, however, that if the city did not erect a market house on the land within ten years, the land would revert to her and her heirs “forever.”\(^9\)

The most popular site was the middle of a street wide enough to handle a market house as well as traffic on both sides. A street location let city officials economize by providing this basic amenity on property that was already publicly owned. Usually the street chosen was not only wide but also oriented along a prominent north-south or east-west axis of a grid plan, for the convenience of farmers bringing goods to market.\(^10\)

High Street in Philadelphia was the quintessential market street, with its series of longitudinal sheds commencing at the Delaware River (fig. 2.2). Public reaction to sheds in the middle of the city’s busiest street was mixed. In 1777 Jacob Duché, a Frenchman living in Philadelphia, remarked that “the principal street, which is an hundred feet wide, would have a noble appearance, were it not for an ill-conditioned court-house, and a long range of shambles, which they have stuck in the very middle of it.”\(^11\) When the city proposed to extend High Street Market from Third Street to Fourth Street in 1785, nearby property owners complained that the extension would deprive them “of the Air the Prospect and other Advantages of the largest Street of the City.” They were “alarmed by divers Petitions of Inhabitants of the City and Country, pretending it would be much for the good or Convenience of the Public if Shambles should be erected before the Door of Your Petitioners.” Inspired by the “Declaration of Rights, the whole Spirit thereof, and the 46th Section of the Constitution [of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania],” the petitioners
claimed their right and “all Men’s Right to High Street and all other Streets of the City so as they were first laid out in the City Plan.” The property rights of the forty-one petitioners, including prominent attorney Jared Ingersoll, did not prevent the city from defending its role as principal provider of food retailing facilities for the more than a thousand people living around High Street between Third and Fourth Streets. The issue was settled when a 1786 act of assembly empowered the city wardens to extend the market.

Street markets in other cities elicited negative remarks from the occasional resident or traveler. A gentlemen complained in the Mobile Commercial Register on November 12, 1828, that Government Street “had been shorn of more than half of its dignity, by building three market houses, plump in the middle of it—much to the annoyance of one gentleman of the long robe, who lived hard by, and who, in consequence, has disposed of his dwelling for less than half its value.” Equally snobbish about the appearance of street markets was Benjamin Henry Latrobe, who described the one in Norfolk as having an “irregular position [that] is in harmony with its filth and deformity.”

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Despite random complaints from a minority of property owners and travelers, the street remained the most consistent and popular choice for a market site throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. Anticipating the eventual need for a market house, new towns also made provisions in their plans for an extra wide street for the purpose. The original 1828 plat of Logansport, Indiana, for example, declared that Market Street would be sixty-six feet wide, except between Walnut and Bridge Streets, where it would widen to ninety-nine feet for a marketplace. Early nineteenth-century plans for other towns in the Midwest, such as Detroit (1807), Indianapolis (1821), and Louisville (1836), indicate that locating a market house in the middle of a major thoroughfare was common practice and not confined to eastern cities (fig. 2.3).  

**Financing**

After selecting a site, cities financed market house construction in a number of ways. Lotteries stimulated public interest, avoided tax increases, and were popular fundraisers for market houses and other public buildings and services. They were susceptible to fraud, however, and were generally prohibited by the early nineteenth century (fig. 2.4). More common was fundraising by subscription. In Philadelphia, the Norwich Market superintendents offered 6 percent annually to those subscribing to loans for a new neighborhood market. They subsequently protected business in the new market by forbidding door-to-door hawkers and peddlers. The township printed the peddler ordinance in local English and German newspapers and on one hundred handbills. Other cities quickly passed ordinances protecting their investment in a new market house. In 1823 the city of Mobile, Alabama, restricted food retailing to its new market house on Government Street “and no where else” until it could pay builders John Ward and Turner Stark with revenues generated from stall rentals.  

Private individuals sometimes financed the construction of a new market house or the repair of an old one. Examples of such philanthropy, or perhaps economic necessity, were common after the Revolution. New York’s Bear Market was in such a state of decay that several inhabitants, wanting to lure back the farmers, contributed to its repair without expecting the city corporation to reimburse them. The butchers of High Street Market in Philadelphia, equally eager to resume business after the British evacuated the city in
1778, repaired the market in exchange for rent-free stalls. Not only war but also natural disasters prompted concerned citizens to act on their own. After a fire destroyed Savannah’s old market on Ellis Square in 1820, “a large number of respectable inhabitants” petitioned the General Assembly to let them

**Figure 2.3** Plan of the central portion of Detroit, 1807. The market house is noted at the intersection of Jefferson and Woodward Avenues, *bottom center*, just a few blocks from the river. Courtesy of Cornell University Library.
**LIST OF PRIZES**

**DRAWN IN THE**

**PRECINCTS MARKET-HOUSE LOTTERY.**

Those Numbers to which no sums are annexed, are Prices of Six Dollars.

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**Figure 2.4** List of prizes drawn in the Precincts Market-House Lottery, Baltimore, 1804–1809. The Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore.
erect a public market on the square at their own expense, vesting all rents and profits in the city corporation.  

Local government often allocated the Freemasons space in the market house free of charge in exchange for their building, extending, or repairing it. In 1797 the town of Providence permitted St. John's Lodge of Masons to build a third story over the market for its use and at its expense. In 1798 the need for more market space (and perhaps a new roof) prompted the burgesses of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to contract with Free Masons Lodge 43 to add a floor above the market that they could use in perpetuity. In 1817 Colonel Timothy Mountford dedicated the entire upper floor of the market house in Alexandria, Virginia, to a museum of the local Masonic lodge.

In addition to collaborating with the Freemasons, towns exchanged free space in the market house for labor with a variety of other organizations and individuals. The trustees of Portsmouth, Virginia, let Edward Newman use the market hall for one year if he would glaze and repair the windows, install an interior staircase, repair the plaster, and whitewash the walls. The trustees, however, expected Newman to let them use the market on public occasions. Two years later they granted the Baptist Society permission to use the market hall if the members would put a new sill under the door, mend the plaster, and glaze all the windows.

Complex social and economic relationships lay behind the construction of the market house in Charles Town, Virginia (now in West Virginia), where the building was financed by a combination of donated land, labor exchanged for use of the market, and profit from the sale of the builder's slaves. In 1801 Samuel and Dorothea Washington deeded the land to the town. In 1806 the town's trustees, eager to complete a market house, authorized Ferdinando Fairfax to finish it in exchange for use of the upper floor. Fairfax then sold his slave Charlotte and her sons Nicholas, Obadiah, and George to James Anderson for $650; in payment, Anderson gave Fairfax $200 in cash and completed the brickwork on the market house.

Market House Typology

Cities and towns throughout the country considered several factors before building a market house. They looked at not only topography, shape of the site, financing, and construction costs, but also local building traditions, current trends in the style of public buildings, and projected number of tenants.
This multitude of considerations resulted in designs that can be found in any region of the country, at any time during the century, and in some cases within the same city. Basically, market houses were variations on two types: the shed and the mixed-use market house. Neither type is an American invention.

The simple, freestanding shed was the most prolific type of market house, lending itself well to a street location. It had been a standard form in colonial America, as it was throughout England and the Continent. Open or closed, it consisted of arches of stout timber or brick pillars supporting a low-pitched gable roof. Builders occasionally added wide projecting eaves to increase the space for marketing.21 Sheds provided minimal protection from the elements for the least cost, did not require an architect, and were quick to build. Sometimes they were built over time as a string of separate structures that allowed for cross traffic and separated the buildings by food type. In part the shed was popular because builders were familiar with using a modular bay system to achieve the desired length for structures like barns and churches. In addition, the shed’s multiple entrances made the market attractive and accessible to patrons coming from any direction; its openness promoted air circulation and helped in unloading goods; and it was easy to wash down at the end of a market day. Likewise, cities that were seats of local or regional government found it economical and convenient to append the market shed to the courthouse or town hall, as in York, Pennsylvania (fig. 2.5). In these locations builders had to adapt the size and plan of the sheds to existing public buildings and sites. Sheds could also be extended or added to as business demanded. By the 1850s, for example, the Pittsburgh courthouse was surrounded by covered market stalls, walkways, and a spacious semicircular market shed in the square across the street for selling bulky items and parking wagons (fig. 2.6).22

Its horizontal plan and low elevation made the shed an obvious market type for a street location. In general it provided the greatest flexibility for the least cost, and its widespread use attests to its popularity throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. The shed in the middle of Market Street in Albany, New York, was typical. Depicted by artist James Eights as it may have looked in 1805, the two- by eight-bay market house had sufficient clearance for traffic, was low enough not to overpower the residences and other public buildings, and was level and slightly raised for drainage (fig. 2.7).23

One of the longest markets was High Street Market in Philadelphia, which by 1807 consisted of three structures that extended from Water Street to Fourth Street (see fig. 2.2). Charles William Janson paced off the market and
Figure 2.5 Centre Square, York, about 1830. Watercolor by William Wagner. The York County Heritage Trust, Pennsylvania.

Figure 2.6 Courthouse and market, Pittsburgh, about 1840. Lithograph (1859) by Otto Krebs after a sketch by J. P. Robitser. Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.
determined that it was 420 steps long, excluding street intersections. High Street Market’s impressive length made it the standard for all others. When Luigi Castiglioni described Baltimore’s Fells Point Market, he referred to it as being “built on the model of the one in Philadelphia.” In describing New York’s Fly Market, a gentleman wrote that it was “perhaps as long as one of the ranges of the Philadelphia ‘High Street Market.’”24

High Street Market was praised not only for its length, but also for the symmetry and simplicity of its sheds. One admirer hoped that “no pragmatical architect will destroy this symmetry, by adopting new dimensions as to height or breadth, and taking a different curve for his arch.” The design needed “no alteration,” as “the piers are square, massive, simple in their mouldings,” and the “roof could not be higher without deforming the street, and incommoding the inhabitants, and the arch below and pediment above are pleasing and graceful.” The architectural critic recommended that for the piers and roof the city consider materials more durable than brick and wood, such as stone, since it would be more cost effective in the long run for such an important utilitarian structure.25
Nineteenth-century local histories attest to the widespread use of market sheds in the Midwest. The “Old Market House” in St. Louis, for example, consisted of a simple shingled roof resting on stone pillars (fig. 2.8).²⁶ Similarly, the first market house in Logansport, Indiana, was described as “simply a roof resting on brick pillars ten to twelve feet apart.” When a storm carried the roof away in 1845, the town built a second market house in the 1850s—this time in the middle of Market Street where it widened to form what was then known as the marketplace. The new structure, 150 by 30 feet, was still basically a shed, but its durability was improved with brick arches (fig. 2.9).²⁷

Market sheds in the South were usually long one-story frame buildings with whitewashed walls and low-pitched roofs. The earliest known image of the principal market house in Houston, Texas, depicts such a structure adjacent to the city hall (fig. 2.10). Built for the city in 1840 by Thomas Stansbury and Sons, the Houston market house featured lattice sides to protect the interior from the sun while providing ventilation. A long one-story frame structure also served as the principal market house in Washington, D.C., throughout the antebellum period until it (like the market house in Houston) was replaced by a more substantial brick structure in the 1870s.²⁸

The second type of market house—the mixed-use market—had an open, arcaded ground floor for marketing, surmounted by one or more stories devoted to other public purposes. In this type of structure marketing was secondary to the main purpose of the building, whether a town hall or a courthouse, and was primarily a source of revenue. Throughout the nineteenth
Figure 2.9 Market House, Logansport, Indiana, about 1851. Watercolor by Wils Berry. Cass County Historical Society, Indiana.

Figure 2.10 City market house and city hall, Houston, 1852. Watercolor by Thomas Flintoff. Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.
century, the mixed-use market house remained fairly constant in form, though the function of the upper stories changed based on local need. Town council minutes record dozens of uses for the upper stories of such market houses, including but not limited to city council chambers, clerk’s offices, fire houses, prisons, watch houses, police headquarters, drill rooms, museums, libraries, schools, Masonic halls, opera houses, and theaters.  

By locating a market on the ground floor of another public building—to finance the building—cities could afford to indulge in new architectural refinements. When the Albany common council considered erecting “a new market & offices” in 1828, architect Philip Hooker proposed ten market stalls on the open, arcaded ground floor and a second story for a public justice room, courtroom, city surveyor’s office, city superintendent’s office, and two conference rooms. The Doric colonnade, simple entablature, and shallow-domed cupola reflected the current taste for Greek Revival in major public buildings. At the same time, Hooker’s choice of a one-story shed for two other market houses in Albany demonstrated that the shed still remained a viable type, especially for smaller, less central sites.

The most famous Greek Revival market house in the country was Boston’s Faneuil Hall Market, built from 1823 to 1826 under the direction of Mayor Josiah Quincy (fig. 2.11). Unprecedented in the United States in size, cost, and

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**Figure 2.11** Portrait of Josiah Quincy, 1824. Oil on canvas by Gilbert Stuart. Quincy holds the architectural plans of Faneuil Hall Market, which appears in the background. Gift of Miss Eliza Susan Quincy. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Reproduced with permission. © 2000 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. All rights reserved.
The new market—designed by Alexander Parris and built with $1 million in public funds—provided more space for merchants and customers, who had outgrown the ground floor of the adjacent Faneuil Hall. An early example of urban renewal, the project involved closing narrow streets and demolishing dilapidated buildings on land obtained by eminent domain. The city constructed the domed section in the center of the market house and auctioned the surrounding lots to investors, who then built the wings in accordance with Parris’s plans. Observers hailed the granite market house (fig. 2.12), approximately 500 by 36 feet, as the largest and most elegant in the country and perhaps even “in the world”—a market house that “exceeded them all in boldness of design, in promise of public benefit, and in energy of execution.”

Anne Royall was less laudatory than the press concerning the promise of Faneuil Hall Market as a model. As she observed construction nearly finished in 1826, she noted the beauty of the smooth masonry walls but could not help commenting on the building’s absurd size relative to High Street Market in Philadelphia. Royall wrote skeptically that “it is laughable (I mean for those who are not contra disposed,) to see the pains and cost they are at to construct a building the least calculated for the purpose intended of any thing else. . . . I mean the convenience of a market-house is, to have it long, narrow, and open
on all sides, so that the articles may be spread abroad, and the people may have both room and light. The same money they are spending on this, would have built a complete market-house, three times as long, and ten fold more to the purpose.” Although Quincy’s achievement boasted the architectural refinements usually accorded to the mixed-use market house, critics like Royall believed that construction costs did not justify its sole use as a market and that a long, low market house would have sufficed. Nonetheless, the debates surrounding Faneuil Hall Market revealed contemporary attitudes about the need to balance the functional and aesthetic aspects of market houses.

Construction

Regardless of simplicity in design, builders and architects were still accountable to local committees that dictated every detail of the market house—in some cases down to the size of the nails. The 1819 ordinance of St. Francisville, Louisiana, was typical, providing for the erection of a market house

53 feet long, 20 feet wide, and 12 feet from the floor to the plates, and built in the following manner, viz: There shall be raised on each side 5 brick pillars 3 feet wide and 18 inches thick of equal distance on which shall be laid the plates for the roof, the roof to be firmly framed in a manner to support its own weight, . . . and finished with an arched ceiling or otherwise at the discretion of the commissioners; the shingles for said roof shall be at least 20 inches long, ¾ inch thick, not to shew to the weather more than 6 inch and nailed through the middle with a 6d cut nail, and in every other respect laid in a workman like manner, all the timber in said roof to be of the best cypress, there shall be run parallel with and 5 feet from each wall of said house a fence of posts and one rail, and at each end of said house there shall be 2 turn stiles of suitable size as pass ways thro’ the fence, said fence all to be made of good cypress timber and the turnstiles hung with iron bolts and ring. The floor of said house together with the whole space within the fence shall be a good brick pavement, all the brick work to be made of good & suitable materials.

The ordinance established not only the right of the market commissioners to alter the design at their discretion, but also the right of city trustees to give final approval of the building and its site.

The 1806 ordinance for the erection of the market house in Charles Town stressed the features city officials most desired for public buildings—quality
The Market House

and speed of construction and simplicity in design. The ordinance authorized Ferdinando Fairfax to build a foundation of “earth well rammed inside, and outside, ready to be received a good pavement of hard brick . . . upon a good bed of sand.” The ordinance also instructed Fairfax to provide the market house with “a strong neat roof,” “plain cornice,” rafters “strengthened either with studs, or collar-beams,” “two tiers of strong joists,” and “a good floor throughout.” The three doorways were to be finished with “plain single architraves, the doors to be made plain and strong,” and each large room on the upper floor was to be finished with “plain washboards and chair boards, a plain single mantle piece, and two coats of strong brown mortar plaistering all round.”

Subscribers and city officials were the final judges of quality. Although William Earl agreed to complete a new market house for the Borough of Pittsburgh in a “good and workman like manner,” subscribers of the new market measured the dimensions against those in the contract and found the piers to be incorrect (fig. 2.13). The affidavit demonstrated that building standards were important, even for the simplest market house.

A final statement of pride in even the most modest market was assigning a popular name. Crown Market in New York, for example, originally took its name from royalty, but in 1797 the city renamed it Liberty Market “to suit an emblem of our Republic.” Likewise, in 1822 the New York city council named the new market house at the Old Slip Market after Benjamin Franklin. New York continued naming market houses after national heroes into the 1830s, when it established the Jefferson Market and Lafayette Market. It renamed the latter the Monroe Market shortly after the fifth president died in 1831.

Floor Plans and Furnishings

The simplest market sheds had unobstructed floor plans without stalls, though vendors still were required to “take their stands” at specified locations under the roof. The 1805 ordinances of Baltimore required butchers to stay within a line “drawn six inches from the inner edge of one pillar, to six inches from the inner edge of another, and no butcher shall hang any meat or other thing, or place any fixture in the outside of said line.” Moreover, though butchers could erect boxes or closets in their stands, furnishings had to remain under the shambles and be raised high enough off the floor for a broom to pass under them. Butchers who sold from unfurnished stands, such as New York butcher John Aimes, brought their own tables to market each day.
Figure 2.13 Affidavit of the subscribers of the market house in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, June 30, 1802. Pennsylvania State Archives, RG 48, LR 102, microfilm of Pittsburgh Borough and Council Papers, 1789–1917.
More typically, market houses were repetitive-celled structures with built-in wooden stalls or benches as provided for in the plan. New York’s Fly Market, for example, was 224 feet long and 20 feet wide, with one stall at the head of the market and eighteen stalls on the sides (thirty-seven stands). The back of each stall was placed in line with the inner side of the market posts, and an eleven-foot passageway ran down the center. Municipal ordinances specified stall dimensions to the inch, and no deviations were permitted without prior permission of the clerk. Specifications for a market house in West Chester, Pennsylvania, provide a detailed account of butcher stalls made of high-quality white oak. Benches were framed with posts four inches square, enclosed at the sides to form a box with a door at one end. A plank an inch and a half thick formed the countertop. Each bench was secured to the market house by an upright post, four inches square, framed into the end of the bench and the ceiling above. Meat rails consisted of three planks per stall, four inches by one and a half, secured horizontally into the upright post at one end of the bench and the mortise in the pillars at the other end. Each meat rail was supplied with eight iron hooks and could be taken down every night—implying that butchers were required to clean their meat rails daily and to secure them overnight in the box beneath the bench. Stall features evolved according to the needs of the trade and were probably fairly standard from city to city (fig. 2.14). Once the market house was completed, the responsibility of civic authorities for providing the community with food retailing facilities had just begin. The greatest challenge was to determine the “most just and equitable” method of assigning stalls, which was usually by lot. Elaborating on the lot system was the borough council of Harrisburg, which managed construction of a new market house in 1815. On July 21 the council hoped to accommodate the increased population and “the necessity of raising a more efficient revenue” by renting the first fourteen stalls, beginning with the most expensive corner ones and ending with the cheapest. If the city found occupants for the first fourteen stalls, the clerk of the market would begin to auction off the next fourteen in the same manner, until all were spoken for. Concentrating rented stalls at one end of the market had several advantages. It maximized city revenues by ensuring that the most expensive stalls were occupied first; the clerk could more easily supervise the market; the conditions were right for symbiosis, where vendors benefit from their proximity; and the vacant end of the market house could be used to store fire-fighting equipment. Until the fire station developed
Building the Common Ground


into its own building type, fire companies typically stored their equipment in market houses or other utilitarian buildings and sheds.43

Once the stalls were assigned, the clerk maintained a record of occupants and in some cities, such as New York and Trenton, placed a sign over each
stall with the name of the occupant “in large letters.” Clearly marked stalls helped the public to recognize legitimate vendors as well as stalls that were available for rent.44

Despite its apparent disorder, the market house was a highly rational structure that allowed local authorities to satisfy both the functional and the aesthetic objectives of urban food retailing. It stood at the civic and commercial core of the city, forging relationships between farmers, small businesses, and local financial institutions, whose success was entwined with the prosperity of the market. The area around the market house attracted other businesses, such as a newspaper office, hotel, tavern, bank, bookseller, printer, dry goods establishment, clothier, shoe store, saddler and harness maker, blacksmith, and makers of stoves, tinware, and hardware—to name just a few. The economic power of the market as a magnet for commerce has been a long-standing urban pattern, with the livelihood of artisans and shopkeepers depending on their nearness to the marketplace. The area immediately around the market house was the most prized; after that came the major streets that led to the countryside. The market was thus a town’s most precious asset.45 It was given priority for a host of public services, including running water, lighting, fire hydrants, sidewalks, drainage, and other amenities. As a social and economic priority, the public market had a special atmosphere that no other place in the city could claim—an atmosphere that combined the pragmatic benefits of comfort and convenience with the added touch of excitement and entertainment. It is not surprising that in 1797, when the town council of Frederick, Maryland, authorized street repairs and improvements to Market Street, it declared the space “the most public street in said town.”46