Introduction

Since the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the market area near Faneuil Hall has been at the heart of the Boston’s long history. Its story begins with the arrival of the Massachusetts Bay colonists in 1630, and the settlements and open-air trading that followed. The marketplace became more permanent in 1742, when Peter Faneuil donated the much needed market house that still bears his name. Faneuil Hall housed merchants for many years and hosted a succession of Revolutionary War events. In the early 1800s Josiah Quincy responded to the growing crowds at the market. The story of how Mayor Quincy enlarged the markets in such a grand way and of how they were rescued in the late twentieth century is an inspiring one, for it is in keeping with the grand ideals of our nation, many of which were first emphasized in old downtown Boston, the city’s birthplace.

The story of this marketplace parallels the shifting fortunes of its city, from its days as a primitive colony to its present existence as a modern urban center. The marketplace was so prosperous that Bostonians built wharves upon wharves and filled in the water to make more room for trade. It served the everyday needs of citizens for years on end. And when it fell into need of renewal, an extraordinary person always stepped forward to pull it out of chaos.

By the time Boston was incorporated into a city in 1822, the almost two-hundred-year-old market district, then centered around Faneuil Hall, had become overwhelmed by the volume of its trade by ship. In addition, multitudes of regional farmers converged upon its narrow streets on market days, bringing produce and livestock to sell to city dwellers. Conditions continued to worsen until the market area became so congested and unhealthy that it was characterized as “a labyrinth of crooked and narrow alleys, frequently choked with farmers’ wagons and trucks” that “mingled the offensive odor of the salt ooze with that of garbage and filth peculiar to such a locality.” These conditions were the result of the city’s recent population boom, the inability of the city to respond immediately, and a severe depression that followed a long period of economic expansion.
In 1823, in order to remedy the markets’ situation, the new City of Boston, under its second mayor, Josiah Quincy, demolished most of the market district’s buildings and wharves, and created new land between Faneuil Hall and the water. Upon this filled land three new colossal buildings were constructed: two long, four-and-a-half-story warehouselike buildings that would hold individual multifloor units for stores and a central market house just as long as its flanking warehouse/store buildings. This central building looked not unlike an oversized ancient temple, but instead of European marble, it was built of New England granite. The three new buildings, called by their collective and formal name Faneuil Hall Markets—or simply “the markets”—served Boston as its chief wholesale and retail food distribution center for the next 125 years.

By the early 1950s, however, the market district was again in desperate need. The victim of urban flight to suburbia, its meat, produce, and fish vendors had experienced such a drop in business that many of them had relocated to more profitable centers. Blight set in to such an extent that the very existence of the markets seemed threatened. Fortunately, the marketplace was not demolished.

In 1969, the City of Boston secured a $2.1 million federal grant to restore a portion of its market district. It took several more years of studying the situation and clearing red tape before the city was ready to begin work on the restoration. This was one of the first major waterfront renewal projects in the country, and it soon became a model for other cities. As the project developed, city, state, and federal agencies began working with private industry. Renovations of all three buildings and some of the nearby streets were completed, and the newly named Faneuil Hall Marketplace reopened in phases, between 1976 and 1978. The costs were truly astounding, but so was the result.

The restoration of this important part of Boston’s heritage added to downtown Boston’s overall sense of prosperity. Along with its neighboring renewal projects of the new Government Center and the waterfront, it greatly contributed to the long-term economic health of the city as well.

Today throngs of visitors stream through its buildings and patronize its specialty shops, restaurants, food stalls, and pushcarts. Little do most of these visitors realize, as they stroll through the buildings and along the outside brick and cobblestone concourses, that they are walking on land that covers the remnants of Boston’s old wharves, which still lie buried beneath.
My own fascination with the markets began when I was twelve years old. On a snowy afternoon in December 1963, before the renewal, my father took me to Durgin Park, a restaurant in the old North Market building, not far from Faneuil Hall. At that time, the traditional markets had become a meager collection of meat and fish vendors who sold their wares from partially abandoned buildings and timeworn stalls. Over a steaming lunch of grilled franks, Boston baked beans, and Indian pudding with ice cream, my father told me a story. It was a story that had been told to many Quincy sons at this same restaurant, possibly at the same table, by many Quincy fathers. Quincy Market, he said, using the popular name given to the market house and its warehouse/stores, was named after Josiah Quincy, a Quincy family ancestor.

On that snowy day I learned that Josiah Quincy was of the sixth generation of Quincys in America and that he was renowned for his fortitude, impartiality, and perseverance. A restless man, he never walked when he could mount his horse. He was often seen galloping through the streets of Boston with the long cape of his greatcoat flowing in his trail.

He was Boston’s second mayor and, from the spring of 1823 until the end of 1828, he unselfishly led Boston through its infancy as a city. I was told that he was a highly disciplined, tenacious, resourceful, and sometimes obdurate public officer. His natural powers of persuasion and manipulation were enhanced by his talent for stirring oratory and challenging debate.

One of his greatest achievements, my father told me, came from his resolve to overcome his detractors and to execute a project Herculean for that time—or any time. Initially ridiculed by Bostonians as the “mammoth” project of the mayor, the marketplace he built quietly earned respect, and then affection and awe. Mayor Quincy’s foresight and determination helped him complete the project—on time, despite an unthinkable schedule, and on his own terms, which meant no new taxes to subsidize the endeavor, I was informed. The project had done more than give the city a sense of pride; it had probably saved the new city from bankruptcy, for there had been a major depression at the time, and the marketplace he built served as a center for new business. Had a less able administrator been in office at that time, my father told me, the project would probably have succumbed to its initially strong public opposition or to budget problems.

After lunch on that snowy December afternoon in 1963, filled with pride in
Mayor Quincy's accomplishment, I followed my father as he led me along slushy North and South Market Streets. He showed me the remains of the granite and brick structures and told me of the first time he had seen the marketplace as a boy. I could see in my father's eyes how saddened he was by the sight of the deteriorating warehouse/stores and the soot-darkened granite market house. When we stopped at its west portico, across the street from Faneuil Hall, my father remarked, "Look at the massive weight of these solid granite columns and the proportions of the granite block walls. Imagine what it must have taken to transport this stone to Boston during the early 1800s. What a colossal job it must have been to lift these pieces and put them into place so precisely by hand, not to mention the exhaustive hand-hammered details of the granite everywhere you look."

I gazed in awe at the magnificent structure, dreaming of what it must have been like in the past. Then my father brought me back to earth. "Appreciate what you see here today, son, because there's been talk around the city that the markets may soon face the wrecking ball." Stunned with disbelief, I reached out my hand and touched a soot- and age-blackened granite column. Its past spoke to me as the present could not. At that very moment, I'm sure, the ghost of Josiah Quincy crawled under my skin, where he has remained to this very day.

Whether this conviction is based on reality doesn't matter. The experience was real to me, and later I took solace in the discovery that Josiah Quincy, too, believed that spirits guided him during his own life. When he was twenty-two years old, in December 1794, he made an entry in his journal which said, "I have always encouraged myself to believe that all men are at times, if not always, subject to invisible influences, suggesting thoughts and communicating impulses which give direction to the whole course of their lives. True or false, this belief is consolatory and useful."³

In the years since, I studied the history of Quincy Market and was amazed at what I found. Many of the circumstances that led to the market's inception have been mistakenly reported by storytellers. Numerous legends have grown up around this landmark, most of which have little truth to them. And for good reason.

Apparently, after Mayor Quincy left office, all the architectural records for the markets' development—from the initial drafts to the conceptualized drawings and scale models—were lost. The small amount of information that survives is fragmented and provides only cursory, often contradictory data.
In addition, Josiah Quincy publicly refused all recognition for his efforts. Instead of telling stories about the project’s development, he attributed the success of the marketplace to his colleagues and fellow citizens by stating in his book *A Municipal History of Boston*, “It is due to the men who constituted the city councils at that day, whose intelligence devised, and whose energy effected these great results, and also to the spirit of the citizens, whose votes sustained and encouraged them, through good report and evil report.” And he went on to conclude, “[T]he difficulties with which they had to struggle, and the course of measures by which they were surmounted and success ultimately obtained, should be permanently recorded, as an honor to the past and an example to the future.”

The most accurate of the surviving evidence, however, suggests that the present configurations of the buildings, their physical components, and the street layouts—despite Mayor Quincy’s denials—were indeed the result of his actions while he was in office. This corroborates Quincy family tradition, and it is indeed a story that should be told.

Josiah Quincy’s accomplishment is best described, I think, by Edmund Quincy, who wrote, “The circumstances of the greatest local interest in Mr. Quincy’s municipal administration was the building of Faneuil Hall market-house. The conveniences for the provisioning of the city were at that time of a very limited description, and one of the first considerations which occurred to him after entering on his office was, how these could be enlarged and improved without great expense to the city. From the first to the last he encountered opposition in every shape—of the selfish interests of the property-holders whom it was necessary to buy out, of the parties whose vested interests in the old state of things were endangered, of demagogues who were ready to lay hold of any occasion of persuading the people that they were in danger of ruin, and of cautious citizens who dreaded the creation of an unmanageable city debt. The land made by filling up the dock on a part of which the market-house stands sold for enough to pay for the whole expense of the operation, while the taxable property was increased by the value of the warehouses built upon it.”

I believe that Josiah Quincy’s contribution to Boston is not only unique but inspirational. In terms of its political birth, the marketplace came about through innovative planning. In terms of scale and aesthetics, the buildings are a masterpiece of civic design, both technically and in terms of ornamentation. In terms of business needs, the marketplace gave Boston an elegant center in which new business could
transpire. And in terms of history, a vital relationship to the American Revolution’s “Cradle of Liberty” (Faneuil Hall) and Boston’s ever-evolving waterfront was maintained.

Boston’s signature institution is indeed—literally and in the memory of its people—Quincy’s Market.
“Old men dream dreams. Young men see visions.”
—Josiah Quincy to Samuel Hurd Walley
May 24, 1854
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