

HUNTS POINT

New York's food market links past and future

By Renee Marton

On March 12, 1663, Edward Jessup, British loyalist and “patentee” of the Crown, acquired land in the southern Bronx, bounded on the east by the “Bronckx or Aquehug” river, and on the west by the Quinahunng brook, both easily accessed by ship. This fertile agricultural area blossomed with apple, pear and peach orchards. Wheat was planted to sate the colonists’ appetite for bread and gristmills were visible in the distance. Cattle, hogs, sheep, goats and poultry were plentiful. Slaves provided the workforce (at first, Native Americans, and later, Africans, often brought from sugar plantations in the West Indies). In 1666, Edward Jessup died, leaving the property to his widow, Elizabeth. She sold one hundred-plus acres to her son-in-law Thomas Hunt, on June 20, 1668, and Hunts Point is named after his family.

Three hundred and forty-five years later, the area known as Hunts Point Terminal Market is a fortress of 329 acres of gated and barbed wire encrusted real estate, located on a promontory in the south Bronx that juts into, and is surrounded by, the Bronx and East Rivers.

Hunts Point bills itself as “The Largest Food Distribution Center In The World.” It consists of three separate markets: the Hunts Point Terminal Produce Market, the Cooperative Meat Market, and the New Fulton Fish Market. Taken together, there are more than 12,000 employees, and revenues surpass \$3 billion dollars.

As you enter Hunts Point, you might expect hustle and bustle, but such is not the case. While you might see customers buying meat or fish or produce, Hunts Point is very organized.

Most foods are shipped in and out by truck. I visited the meat market, which is vast and feels empty when no trucks are being loaded or unloaded, especially given the long rows of two-story warehouses that are lined with equally huge loading docks. That wonderful early

All parts of the market were intended to accommodate truck and rail traffic equally, but trucks became the preferred mode of transportation – they were faster than trains, if more expensive. In fact, these days, provisions arrive on trucks, trains, ships and planes from all over the world. Globalization has had the same impact on Hunts Point as has been seen elsewhere: local is now global. Whether imported or locally sourced, food supplies are exported to other states, Canada, Europe and Asia. Still, the immediate tri-state area has a customer base of 23 million consumers.

The Meat, Fish and Produce Markets are situated on their own lots. Each market was originally owned by the city until 1986, when cooperative ownership by the wholesale merchants took over, with the city as landlord. The Meat Market recently negotiated a long lease that runs until 2037.

Both the Fish and Produce Markets were in lease negotiations when this article was completed, a process made more complicated by the market’s lawsuit against the city for its choice of a security firm to investigate business and security practices at Hunts Point. A move to New Jersey or Pennsylvania is possible, with lower taxes, bigger and more modern facilities and easier transport access.

It might seem as though the Hunts Point Market has been there since the days of Thomas Hunt, but in reality, this New York institution is less than 50 years old. How the market came to be is a fascinating tale.

During Thomas Hunt’s lifetime, food markets thrived in lower Manhattan. Farmers came mainly from Brooklyn and Long Island with live animals and wagonloads of produce and fruit. Once butchered, meat had a very short



At groundbreaking ceremonies at Hunts Point in 1962, New York’s Mayor Robert F. Wagner and U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman viewed the architect’s drawing of the planned market complex in this photo in the *New York World-Telegram and the Sun* by Al Ravenna.

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20th century image that we have of old markets does not exist here, despite everyone’s wishful thinking about “the good old days.” What does exist is organization, refrigeration on a mass scale and car and truck traffic when things are busy.

Everyone pays a per-person entry fee, and vehicles are charged by size as well. Security is paramount, with guards in raised booths checking identification. Attempts to reduce thievery and graft are routine in this first line of defense in keeping track of what goes in and out of the market. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, bioterrorism became a major concern. Quality, quantity, safety, sanitation, legal transparency and a reliable chill chain (refrigeration from slaughter to sale) are systems in place. During Rudolph Giuliani’s term as mayor, from 1994 to 2001, even the Mafia was kicked out of Hunts Point (albeit probably not completely).

shelf life, especially during the summer, when rotting bones attracted hordes of buzzing flies and the odor of decomposing meat prompted complaints from those living nearby. Beef and other meats, poultry, eggs and dairy (milk in particular), had to be sold quickly. Quality, price and demand fluctuated.

In 1648, Peter Stuyvesant decreed that pigs, cows, goats and horses would no longer roam freely, and that offal could no longer be thrown into the streets. The first municipal market, on Mondays, was established that year, along the East River, selling "Meat, bacon, butter, cheese, turnips, roots, straw and other products of the farm," according to *Gotham: a History of New York City to 1898*. Butchers were licensed and paid taxes. People who did not follow the law were fined (at least in theory).

Beef was king; by 1770, permanent public slaughterhouses had been created. (Mulberry Street was called Slaughterhouse Row.) Butchers' stalls were magnets for other tradesmen; bakers, oyster sellers, dairymen, produce and fruit carts all created a more extensive market. Other peddlers sold ready-to-eat foods (often made by women householders). Sundries, such as wax, shoelaces and tools could be found. More markets followed: Catherine, Fly, Essex and Fulton (named for their street locations). By the early 1800s, there were 13 public markets competing to feed the rapidly increasing population.

But changes were coming, and the publicly regulated meat markets were deregulated in 1843. A trickle of unlicensed butchers and independent suppliers surged into a flood as private butcher shops opened and bakers, pushcarts and grocers arose to accommodate their largely European immigrant customers: Germans, Italians, Jews, Irish, Poles and other Eastern Europeans. These local shopkeepers and butchers offered convenience, although quality, demand and pricing of the most perishable items (meat, poultry, milk, eggs and seafood) varied daily at the markets. Morning prices were highest, and



Photo by Renee Marton

These days, security is tight at the entrance to the Hunts Point Terminal Market, photographed in the summer of 2013.

decreased as they day wore on, or as the week came to a close (this is still true at Hunts Point, especially for the most perishable item: seafood).

By 1913, the population of New York City had reached 5 million, and "The Report of the Mayor's Market Commission of New York City" was published. Cyrus C. Miller, president of the Bronx, proposed building a wholesale market, specifically to bring urban provisions to the population which was expanding north of 110th street and in the Bronx. He also wanted to remedy the lack of systematic urban food organization and continuously rising prices:



Photo by Danièle Brooks, courtesy of Hunts Point Produce Market

Fresh produce awaits buyers at the Hunts Point Produce Market.

in 1917 between 40 and 60 percent of personal income was used to feed the family. A new ideal was taking hold: provision of safe and affordable food-stuffs for the local population was becoming a public mandate. Food provisioning could and should, be over-

seen by city government, held in check with good urban planning. There was no centralized market, based on the Paris or Berlin models, which were considered state of the art. Eliminating the middleman was a pivotal goal of centralization. The estimated cost for Miller's idea was \$10 million dollars. The real cost, when the Bronx Terminal Market was built in 1917, was \$22 million.

In the Bronx and elsewhere, corruption in food markets continued

to be a problem. Mayor John Hylan created the

Department of Markets in 1925 in an effort to impose controls, but his efforts had little effect on the corrupt system already in place. Layers of "funding" were a standard part of the public market matrix. Infighting among elected officials about market regulation, and the occasional highly publicized trial of racketeers, barely kept a lid on graft.

By the early years of the Depression, many purveyors were "on the brink" of collapse, although prices did not decrease, as desperation took hold. The Bronx Terminal Market was expanded in 1935, with Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia doing the honors at the ribbon cutting.

The market's primary occupants were wholesale produce and fruit sellers. By the 1960s, the market specialized in Caribbean produce and fruit. Some of these purveyors moved to Hunts Point after it opened. Today, the entire area is a shopping mall.

After World War II, immigrants from the crowded tenements of lower Manhattan were inspired to move northward and relocate in the Bronx. This emergent middle class moved to Knightsbridge, Fordham, Morrisania and West Farms, where new apartment houses were sprouting, along with parks, hospitals and schools. In 1965, when immigration quotas were relaxed, the immigrant population shifted ethnically. New immigrants were and are Asian, Indian, African, Caribbean/Latin

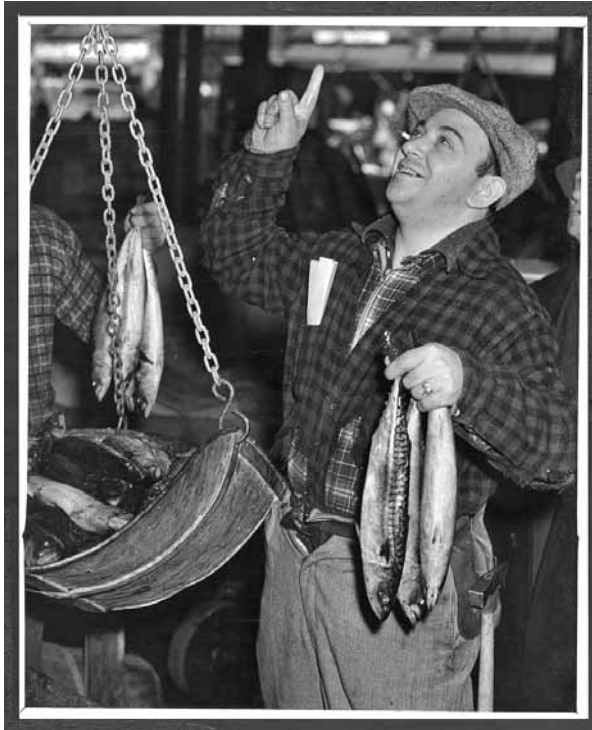
and Mexican. They also live in the Bronx, including Hunts Point, as well as elsewhere in New York City. In the 1950s and '60s, federal funds were used not only to build housing serving a diverse population, but also highways linking the Bronx with the rest of the city via the Major Deegan, the Cross Bronx and the Bruckner Expressways. Roadway access made the Hunts Point Market possible.

Meanwhile, Hunts Point underwent its own evolution. In 1900, the area, where the mansions of Leggetts and Tiffanys had prevailed, started to attract the European melting pot, as roads were paved and apartment buildings built. After World War I, the subway was extended along Southern Boulevard. During and after the Depression, infrastructure was not maintained and services diminished. The area went into decline. Efforts to improve the area provided short-term benefits, but another decline followed. Public funding started reversing this state of affairs, and some industrial facilities arose, including a Con Edison gasification plant, a prison for juveniles and a monastery. By the 1960s, the area was ready for something new.

At the same time, the Washington Street Market, still one of the city's major produce markets, was suffering from severe congestion, terrible traffic and problems with waste disposal. These problems might have been remedied, but in the end, the fate of the market was sealed by a real estate deal; the Twin Towers were to be built on the old market grid.

The groundbreaking ceremony that

initiated construction of Hunts Point took place on March 27, 1962 under the mayoralty of Robert Wagner. U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Orville L. Freeman attended the ceremony, and the Department of Agriculture was



Fishmonger Buck Steo weighs a fresh load of mackerel at the old Fulton Fish Market in a photo taken by Fred Palumbo for the *New York World-Telegram* in 1938.

involved in supporting the as yet non-existent market for meat, eggs, poultry, dairy and cheese and produce. Consolidation of wholesale suppliers would bring costs down through transportation efficiencies, waste reduction and pilferage controls. Annual savings were expected to be between \$10 million and \$15 million dollars. The new market would provide fresher and less expensive food provisions to the metropolitan population. The cost to build was estimated to be \$30.5 million dollars, and construction was expected to take two years. Produce markets from around the city signed up readily, such that the produce market was oversubscribed.

The Hunts Point Produce Market, the first of the three markets-within-a-market, opened on March 21, 1967, according to Myra Gordon, manager of the produce market for the last twenty-plus years. Some 122 produce and fruit purveyors moved from the Washington Street Market, relocating their bins of

cabbages, beans, leeks, sage, rosemary and mint, as well as apples, pears, berries, squash, potatoes and onions to the Bronx. By 1989, 75 percent of all produce and fruit entering the region was handled at the Hunts Point produce market.

The Meat Market moved to Hunts Point in 1974, although not every purveyor moved at once. Bruce Reingold, the genial manager of the meat market, said that the original motivation for locating the market at Hunts Point was because of its optimal distribution pathways in Manhattan, and over the bridges and into New Jersey.

The New Jersey connection was more than a century old. After stockyards were built in New Jersey, by 1850, New York had become the center of beef production in the country. By the time of refrigerated railroad cars, whether iced or electrical, the shipping of "dressed" beef, mainly from Chicago, became the norm. Areas that once housed butchers were repurposed; the United Nations is built on old butchering acreage. In 1906, New York City had 240 sites for slaughtering cattle and hogs. By 1960, slaughtering was banned in

the city. The area we know as the Meat Market near Gansevoort became the last bastion of the remaining meat dealers, but the future was clear; rotting meat, flies and rats could still be found in profusion and cleaning up the city was a priority. It was time for something new.

The meat market at Hunts Point was specifically built for the industry. Back in the 1960s, hanging meat was still the norm, and the facilities were set up with this function in mind. However, in the last 30 years, the cutting has taken place out west, and the meat arrives in boxes.

Beef (and other meats and poultry) continue to be processed through Hunts Point, although in decreasing amounts. While whole animal (beef) production, including exports, has increased in the U.S., per capita consumption of beef within the nation has declined. A combination of high prices, aging of the older European-American consumer, contemporary health concerns and newer immigrant culinary traditions all play a part

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in what sells at Hunts Point. Consumption of beef and poultry in the U.S. has decreased from 190 pounds per person in 1999 to less than 150 pounds per person today. A one-pound rib eye steak with mashed potatoes and creamed spinach – a steakhouse menu icon usually served to one person – is a far cry from the same weight of ground beef chuck stuffed into empanadas, and intended to serve four to six people, or one pound of thinly sliced skirt steak served with sticky rice and pickled cabbage, which could easily serve six. The current revival of whole animal butchery, and the rise of the new butchers, may eventually have an impact on these numbers.

Goat meat consumption, while still a fraction of sales, is increasing rapidly: Muslim, Caribbean, Latin and non-Muslim Indian populations are the primary consumers – so far. If goat is not available, lamb may replace it, and when fresh goat is too expensive, frozen will do. Offal is also more desirable than in the past (although during the heyday of French restaurants in the post-war period, offal was very popular).

There is still a market for high-end prime beef, but it is declining. One or two purveyors still buy sides of beef, delivered on the hook. One such company is Master Purveyors. The company's founder, Marc Solasz, is a concentration camp survivor who started the business on 14th Street in 1957. Today, they have 45 employees, including 10 butchers. They specialize in dry-aged beef, and specialty cuts such as bone-in filet mignon, and specialty burger blends. Beef is aged in drying rooms, and cut to order for expensive steakhouses, such as Peter Luger in Brooklyn. These days, however, the more likely place to see beef carcasses swinging from meat hooks is in reruns of *Rocky*.

The meat market does not have enough room to store all the thousands of boxes of pre-cut, vacuum-packed and boxed meat that arrive weekly. Hun-

dreds of refrigerated trucks are parked throughout the loading dock areas as extra storage space. Since the trucks are left running continuously, the resulting fumes have angered the neighborhood, and rates of asthma and allergies have increased, presumably due to the pollution from the fumes.

The original Fulton Street Fish Market opened in the early 1800s. It moved several times in the neighborhood of Peck Slip, just south of the Brooklyn Bridge. While it flourished until the 1970s, ships were no longer the primary means of transporting fish to the market. Trains, trucks and planes took over, but mostly trucks. One driver that spurred the move to Hunts Point was the successful effort by Rudolph Giuliani,



At the groundbreaking ceremony for Hunts Point Produce Market, Robert F. Wagner and U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman, third and fourth from left, were among the dignitaries manning shovels in this photo by Al Ravenna published in the *New York World-Telegram and the Sun* in 1962.

first as a federal prosecutor and later as the mayor, to take control from the Mafia, which had been a major presence at the fish market since the 1930s. Until Giuliani came along, corruption and racketeering were rampant. In 1995, a huge fire at the market destroyed all records and with that, potential lawsuits. Finally, after 9/11, the market moved temporarily to Hunts Point as the city was locked down below 14th street. It moved to Hunts Point in 2005. Today, it is second in size only to the Tsukiji market in Tokyo, the largest wholesale fish market in the world.

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, purchasers would buy directly

from fishmongers on Fulton Street in lower Manhattan. Late night revelers would stop in for oysters and good cheer. Hookers, drinkers and taverns were abundant. Chefs would come in search of the best fish for their restaurants a little later in the "day" – by 3 or 4 a.m. Many vendors say they miss "the good old days" even though their seafood is now housed in a state-of-the-art refrigerated warehouse, with more space than ever before, much easier cleanup, and no odor of old fish. Telephone orders and ordering online have replaced the haggling and socializing of yore.

In 1924, the Fulton Street market sold 384 million pounds of seafood – 25 percent of all seafood sold in the U.S.

While most large fish markets use the auction system for selling fish wholesale, in New York City there are multiple pricing strategies that depend not only on what customers will pay, but how much they buy, the freshness and status of the fish and how close the timing of the purchase is to the market's week-end closing. In the old days, halibut was king. Today, it is so expensive, only Le Bernardin and equivalent restaurants can afford to buy it. Monkfish, once a trash fish, has become expensive. Hake – a fish once reserved for fish sticks – has become more popular because it is less expensive, and newcomers don't have old habits or preconceptions to overcome. Shellfish is similar; squid and shrimp are ever popular, and octopus is on the rise.

Today, 44 fish purveyors compete with wholesale markets in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, as well as with fish brokers who buy for hotels, institutions and large restaurant chains. Seafood brokers make deals with many different fish suppliers to get exactly what they want, at the price they want. With sophisticated refrigeration chains and rapid transport, freshness is no longer the first item of importance. One consequence of these trends is that the Fulton Fish Market processed only 5 percent of the seafood sold in the U.S. in recent years.

As competition from neighboring states that have their own wholesale markets has increased, not just for fish, but for meat and produce as well, verti-

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cally integrated companies like Whole Foods, which have their own suppliers and distribution centers, are presenting stiff competition, especially as they build more stores. The Greenmarkets, too, are taking a bite – more like a nibble – out of Hunts Point; there is even a Greenmarket at Hunts Point. One result of increased competition: by 2012, just 22 percent of all produce and fruit entering the region moved through Hunts Point, down from 75 percent in 1989.

Today there are 38 produce purveyors. This decline from the original 122 reflects changes that have taken place during the last 50 years, including absorption of smaller family-run companies into larger corporate-owned entities, as well as a shift in production and distribution systems for large retailers

possibilities and an ever-increasing desire to reconnect with the public, one person at a time. An online presence, and a possible TV program for the produce market, may help deflect its declining fortunes.

And while the desire to keep Hunts Point Market in the Bronx is keenly felt by all those who work there, and by New York politicians, challenges abound. Competition, changing consumer habits and modern shifts in the way the food industry does business – not to mention city politics – have all taken their toll.

For now, though, the trucks continue to check in at Hunts Point each day to load and unload the tons of food destined for tables in the greater New York area and beyond. If Thomas Hunt could see it all, he would be amazed.



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A truck at a loading dock at the Hunts Point Market, photographed by Nat Fein for the *New York World-Telegram and the Sun* when the produce market opened in 1967.

such as Costco and Whole Foods, which do not use Hunts Point. In addition, early immigrant families who started these produce businesses, and whose children then took over, can no longer assume that the next generation will carry on; the grandchildren of the first immigrants climb the educational ladder and seek employment that provides better hours, wages and status.

A creation of the mid-20th century, the Hunts Point Market is adapting to an age that is at once more technology-driven and more global and yet nostalgic for the days of an agrarian society. In an effort to keep up, each market at Hunts Point has its own website, with colorful videos and photos, subscriber

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