

Title: Fulton Fish Market Moves

From *South Street Seaport: From Its Original Conception to Its Present Day Revival*

Author: Jessica Mazzola. Undergraduate, Fordham University at Lincoln Center

12 December 2007

From 1822 to 2005, the Fulton Fish Market operated from its large tin building in South Street Seaport, providing fresh fish to the residents of Manhattan. Throughout the entire history of the Seaport, and especially during the Restoration Period, the fish market was seen as the most authentic aspect of the area, that which really connected the South Street's visitors with the water and the true commerciality that made the Seaport a historically significant site. This esteemed presence of the Fulton Fish Market at South Street Seaport gave way to the nostalgic sorrow of some, the criticisms of others, and the relief and joy of most who worked there, when it finally made the long awaited move to Hunt's Point in the Bronx in November 2005.

Plans to move the fish market to the Bronx have been in fishmongers' and owners' minds since the 1950's, when David Rockefeller was planning the financial district expansion.⁴ Although Rockefeller's redevelopment was abandoned with The Friends of South Street Seaport's Restoration, the idea of relocating Fulton Fish Market remained in the minds of owners and operators. The city first announced plans to move it to Hunt's Point in 1969, and they were met with a considerable amount of opposition from the workers who were concerned about commuting, job-cutting, and increased rents for store space; these apprehensions were repeated when the move actually took place decades later. The financial crisis of New York City in the 1970's and restoration of South Street Seaport in the 1980's seemed to anchor the market in its Fulton Street location, especially with the signing of a thirty-year lease in 1984.⁴

Ironically, the redevelopment is what pushed Fulton Fish Market from South Street to the Bronx. While local residents of Manhattan appreciated the market in its historic location, many tourists complained of the smell wafting into the retail area of the South Street Seaport Complex. Because the theme of the redevelopment of South Street Seaport moved away from its maritime history, Fulton Fish Market no longer seemed to fit in with its surroundings. The Rouse Company's response to these complaints, a campaign to make the area more tourist-friendly, combined with the logistical issues presented by inadequate room for trucks and inefficient refrigeration, mechanical, and drainage infrastructure to make the move seem necessary.⁴ The facility at South Street Seaport was described as "... a place beloved by food writers and photographers but ill suited to selling perishable goods on the street and a punishing place for men who have to stand outdoors in all kinds of weather."¹ Although its historic and nostalgic value was an important consideration, bad conditions at the Fulton Fish Market, like dim lighting, melting ice boxes being the only means of keeping the fish fresh, and other violations of federal regulations were becoming an increasing problem.²

Typical of South Street Seaport's restoration process, moving was met with opposition and was further delayed by a legal dispute. Long Island's Laro Service Systems, the company

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that moves the fish from delivery trucks to the vendors in the market was feuding with the cooperative of wholesalers. The wholesalers no longer believed the services of the company were necessary and they wished to complete the transportation of the fish themselves. After years and millions of dollars spent in court, Laro Service Systems and the wholesalers decided to put aside their differences and keep things as they were until 2008 so that the dispute would no longer inhibit the move to Hunt's Point.¹ With issues at least temporarily quelled, all vendors who could afford to do so moved out of the Tin Building in lower Manhattan and into the large \$85 million refrigerated structure in Hunt's Point in November 2005.¹ The new building would solve many of the ills created by the conditions and location of the old, especially with its "... sinks, floor drains, and other instruments of government – regulated food safety."²

While most of the workers rejoiced, some also expressed regret at leaving what had become a landmark to both the workers and the public. Vendor Bobby DiGregorio said, almost in disbelief, that the city was "...throwing away its history."¹ Many share his view, as the market was one of the only remaining maritime-driven, authentic businesses in the area, and the venue most identifiable with the history of South Street as a port. Others added more practical worries to this air of regret. They raised the concerns that traditional customers would not travel to the new, inconvenient location, or that the refrigeration units would prove time-cost ineffective over time.² Other critical workers expressed signs of anger, as both rent and parking prices were higher in the Bronx, especially when combined with the additional cost of transportation and commuting. In some cases, these additional expenses were too much for them to handle and a handful of vendors were forced to close their doors forever because of the move.¹

Since its relocation to the Bronx, the Fish Market has benefited from the improved conditions. The refrigeration units and easier accessibility has led to increased profits, totaling approximately \$1 billion yearly. Although there is debate about whether the market, with the increased traffic and pollution that it brings to the area, is entirely beneficial to the population of the Bronx, the move promoted better working conditions, transportation of fish, and profit-making capabilities. However, the building it formerly occupied in South Street Seaport has remained a vacant, unutilized space. General Growth Properties, the real estate company that bought the Rouse Company in 2004, and controls most of the 38-acre South Street Seaport Historic District, will likely help to decide what happens to the Tin Building and empty New Market Building next door. They share this decision making power with the city's Economic Development Corporation, who has technical control of the buildings, but has not yet publicly declared any tentative plans for the space.³

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While both General Growth Properties and the Economic Development Corporation have yet to express ideas about using the space, many other groups have worked toward making something useful of this important spot. New Amsterdam Public, an activist pair made up of "... a nonpracticing architect and Slow Food advocate, Robert LaValva, and a city planner, Jill Slater..." are actively working toward promoting a new plan for the site.³ They and their supporters would like to fill the Tin Building with a public market that offers locally generated foods. This idea, echoing the original conception for the South Street Seaport, and something that many would feel an appropriate replacement for the Fulton Fish Market, has gathered a lot of support from the community in recent months. The local community board, as well as many elected officials representing the area, and even administration of General Growth Properties, have expressed interest in and support of the plan. With the increased population in the area since September 11th, 2001, and its seemingly perfect fit into the projected atmosphere of South Street, they feel that the time is ripe for the plan to be put into action.³ However, as with every change that has taken place in the Seaport since the Restoration began, New Amsterdam Public will have a long road ahead of them if they plan on making their dream a reality.

- ⁴ Mensch, Barbara G. South Street. Introduction by Philip Lopate. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.
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- ¹ Jacobs, Andrew. "Fish Market's Salty Souls Bid South St. a Misty Adieu." The New York Times. 12 November 2005.
- ² "Fulton Fish Market Departs." www.lowermanhattan.info . 13 June 2005.
- ¹ Jacobs, Andrew. "Fish Market's Salty Souls Bid South St. a Misty Adieu." The New York Times. 12 November 2005.
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- ¹ Jacobs, Andrew. "Fish Market's Salty Souls Bid South St. a Misty Adieu." The New York Times. 12 November 2005.
- ³ Hellman, Peter. "New Vision for a Historic Space." The New York Sun. 19 September 2007.
- ³ Hellman, Peter. "New Vision for a Historic Space." The New York Sun. 19 September 2007.
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