

Ask the Hill Historian: Eastern Market

By **Nina Tristani** - November 12, 2018



Carriages and carts in front of Eastern Market, Washington Historical Society

You love shopping there on weekdays or on the weekend but the market's history is as interesting as the building itself. Here's how it began.

On August 18, 1871, the newly formed Legislative Assembly of the Territory of the District of Columbia passed legislation authorizing the Governor of the Territory to purchase a site for a new market and to spend the money necessary to build it. That new market was to become Eastern Market. It was completed in 1873. The now famous market was designed by Adolf Cluss, a prominent architect who also designed the Smithsonian Arts and Industries Building and many other post-Civil War Buildings. It became the first city-owned market to be built under the public works program of the 1870s. Eastern Market was created as part of a city-wide public market system that gave residents access to a wide variety of goods and services that symbolized the much-needed urbanization of Washington, D.C.

Eastern Market was built in an Italianate style with a South Hall and North Hall connected by a Center Hall. The South Hall was built beginning in 1871 and finished

in 1873. Key considerations in Cluss' development of the market were: open plan spacing, arrangement of stalls, ample natural light, ease of access and egress, ventilation, architectural styles and heat.

The Center and North Hall additions were designed by Snowden Ashford and built in 1908. A native Washingtonian, Ashford was the City's first municipal architect. He worked under Supervising Architect of the U.S. Treasury, Alfred B. Mullett, and also contributed to the designs for the Library of Congress under John Smithmeyer. A later addition, the shelter for the outside weekend vendors was added in 1931.

City directories make it hard to identify vendors at the Market prior to 1908. In 1914, there were 51 vendors in the market. Produce dealers were the most prominent, followed by butchers and then cooks. There were three stores and three vendors offering smoked meats, and others offering produce, flowers, butter, poultry, fish, eggs and more. There was also a delicatessen and bakery.

On April 30, 2007, a three-alarm fire ripped through the South Hall of the Market, destroying merchant stands and the surrounding infrastructure. Immediately after the fire, Capitol Hill residents and others from across the District turned out to save the Market. Public concern for the future of Eastern Market led to a prompt response by the local government and then-Mayor Adrian Fenty. The focus was on restoring Eastern Market to the architecturally significant elements of the 1873 Adolf Cluss design. Led by the Capitol Hill Community Foundation, community members immediately sprang into action and started fundraising to support Market vendors while it was closed. Eastern Market reopened on June 26, 2009 after the completion of a \$22 million renovation project funded by the Government of the District of Columbia. Quinn Evans was the architectural firm enlisted to restore the Market. The good news was that the market was back in service.

Whether you're doing your daily shopping at Eastern Market or buying handmade gifts and fresh vegetables from the outdoor weekend market, you'll be continuing a tradition of shopping at public markets that stretches back to the founding of Washington, DC.

Nina Tristani is the co-owner of N&M House Detectives (www.nmhousedetectives.com) and chair of the Capitol Hill Restoration Society's (CHRS) Communications Chair. For more information on this and other issues of historic preservation, visit www.chrs.org.