

UNION MARKET

Historic District

A QUICK LOOK



Photograph Courtesy of Historic District Nomination.

OVERVIEW

Place

- The Union Market Historic District is a complex of wholesale buildings and warehouses bounded by Florida Ave. NE to the south, 4th St. NE to the west, 5th St. NE to the east, and Penn St. NE to the north.

Designation

- The Union Market Historic District and its 70 contributing buildings were designated by the HPRB in 2016 through the efforts of DCPL.
- Added to National Register of Historic Places in 2017.

Period of Significance

- 1929–1939

HISTORY

- The Central Market, though it had been in operation since 1802, moved into a grand Adolf Cluss designed building in 1872. In the years that followed, the building and its clientele attracted numerous private wholesalers named Commission Houses.
- In 1926, Congress, which was in the process of enacting the McMillan Plan for the National Mall, passed the Public Buildings Act. Included, was legislation commanding the construction of the Federal Triangle adjacent to the National Mall. Existing buildings on the site, including the Central Market, were torn down, thus displacing both the farmers of the public market and the private Commission Houses.
- Congressional and public disputes over where to move the farmers of Central Market continued for years until a site in Southwest was chosen. In the meantime, the private wholesalers assembled as the Union Terminal Market Association. In 1928, the Association purchased the current 40 acre site in Northeast called the Patterson Tract, which had originally been home to the Brentwood Estate, followed by Camp Meigs during World War I.
- By 1931 the buildings had been completed, and the farmers from Central Market sought space to sell their goods, as Union Market was in a significantly better location than the one selected by Congress. That year, an outdoor market opened in Union Market to accommodate 300 farmers displaced by the demolition of Central Market.
- Throughout the second half of the 20th century many of the wholesalers moved to the suburbs to large distribution centers, leaving many of the buildings and warehouses without tenants.
- In recent decades Union Market has gone through a transformation, due in part to a study from the DC Office of Planning to provide a development framework for the site. In 2017, a food hall opened across 4th Street NE from the historic district, helping usher in a new age.



DEVELOPMENT AND ARCHITECTURE

Development

- Following the purchase of the site by the Union Market Terminal Market Association, in 1929, the street grid that Union Market now sits on was extended into the site as 4th, 5th, 6th, Morse, Neal, and Penn streets.
- At the same time, the Association negotiated with the B&O Railway to construct a track that would bring trains into the market center.
- By 1931, 100 wholesalers had moved into buildings in Union Market. The market and its retailers' success led to plans for expansion.

Architecture

- Unlike the Washington markets that came before, Union Market was not a single building, but a complex of uniform buildings set in repetition.
- The structures were designed by DC architect E.L. Bullock in a Classical Revival style. Each building was repeated, along with their classical motifs, giving the site a cohesive appearance.
- The buildings are defined by 20 foot loading bays with flat cantilevered roofs supported by Doric columns. Behind the loading docks rise a buff brick second story including bas-reliefs with alternating imagery.



THE MARKET TODAY

- Today, Union Market is not a far cry from its wholesaling origins, but several developments have occurred in recent years.
- The map at right shows the boundaries of the historic district, and where later development took place.
- In 2017 the Union Market food hall opened, spurring development around the historically designated district.
- While some wholesalers remain, several upscale retailers, restaurants, and cafes have moved into the district.

