The USDA defines a farmers market as “a multi-stall market at which farmer-producers sell agricultural products directly to the general public at a central or fixed location, particularly fresh fruits and vegetables (but also meat products, dairy products, and/or grains).” In addition, today’s farmers markets are often home to prepared food, arts and crafts, flowers, baked goods, and other locally produced, handcrafted items.
A RISE, A FALL, A RENAISSANCE

THE HISTORY OF FARMERS MARKETS

Humans have been selling and purchasing farm-fresh food (and more) at markets for thousands of years. From the Greeks agora and Romans’ macellum to the bazaars of Persia, open-air, public markets were a part of daily life in ancient civilizations—and remained so through the middle ages and onward.

The first recorded farmers market in the United States opened in 1634 in Boston, Massachusetts. Others soon followed in the surrounding colonies. The Easton Farmer’s Market in Easton, Pennsylvania has been in operation since 1752—claiming the title of “America’s longest continuous running open-air market.”

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In 20th Century America, farmers markets saw dramatic growth during the Great Depression, but started to decline after World War II as grocery stores became more commonplace and convenient. In the 1980s, interest in farmers markets picked up again.

The rise and fall of farmers markets reflects changes in national policy. Today, there’s growing concern for and interest in “local” —preserving local farmland, protecting the livelihood of local growers, and diversifying local economies—as well as farm workers’ rights, food safety, and training the next generation of farmers. Farmers markets play a prominent role in new food landscape.

ALSO KNOWN AS

A 1948 effort to categorize markets identified many names for markets:

PUBLIC MARKET || MUNICIPAL MARKET || TERMINAL MARKET || FARM SHOP
FARM STAND || CURB MARKET || FLEA MARKET || FARMERS RETAIL MARKET || FESTIVAL MARKET || WET MARKET
FARMERS WOMENS MARKET || TRADE DAY MARKET
LIVESTOCK AUCTION || COURTHOUSE SQUARE MARKET || COURT DAY MARKET || FIRST MONDAY MARKET
|| FRESH FOOD MARKET || GOOD FOOD MARKETS || FARMERS CITY WHOLESALE MARKETS

The McCargar family in Northeast Iowa values a local food economy. The family has a long tradition of growing their own food. In the 1980’s, Steve started vending at the local market. Today, he serves as the market manager. His youngest daughter Elsa started as a market vendor at the same market in 2017. Her business, Wilder’s Way, sells tea blends and nature-inspired jewelry.
**FARMERS MARKETS THROUGHOUT HISTORY**

Markets popped up early in American history. Only 27 years separate the founding of the first colony (Jamestown, Virginia in 1607) and the first formally recorded farmers market in the colonies (Boston, Massachusetts in 1634).

**PRE 20TH CENTURY**

**1600s**

1600s: “Street markets” are so commonplace that markets aren’t given specific names—nobody pays much attention to one being established.

1634: The first farmers market establishment formally recorded in the English colonies is in Boston in 1634 by an order of Governor John Winthrop.

**1800s**

1858: The first farmers market recorded in Iowa takes place in Dubuque at the city hall building (same location where it operates today).

**Late 1800s**: Pattern of declining importance of city produce markets as transportation improves, cities grow, and agriculture becomes specialized.

**1900s**

1900 - 1930s: Most cities with 30,000+ residents sponsor municipal markets.

1913: USDA Office of Public Markets is established.

1914: USDA Cooperative Extension Service is established.

1916: The first self-service grocery store opens in Memphis, Tennessee. This is the first time customers are allowed to select items directly off the shelf instead of asking the store clerk for items behind the counter.

**1920s**

1930 - 1946: Rise in markets across the country as families seek extra income and self-sufficiency.


1943: The San Francisco Farmers Market opens in California.

1946: Four economists with the USDA identify 499 farmers markets in the United States.

1948: Farmers markets of all classes account for sales of less than 10% of the total fruit and vegetable production in the United States. Markets are formally defined as “Places where farmers congregate to sell their own products.”

1950s: Better roads, western irrigation infrastructure, and refrigeration usher in supermarkets and wholesalers, leaving many small farms and markets out of the food system.

1970: Estimates at the national level log only about 340 farmers markets across the country, many populated by resellers—not farmers—and many on the verge of collapse.

1971: State of Wisconsin records 17 markets of all classes (down from 28 in 1946).

1975: U.S. House Resolution 2458: Defines a Farmers Market as “Any marketplace where at least ten farmers congregate for the purpose of selling their agricultural commodities directly to consumers in a manner designed to lower the cost of food for the consumers while providing an increased income to the farmers.”

1996: USDA defines a farmers market as “a common facility or area where several farmers/growers gather on a regular, recurring basis to sell a variety of fresh fruit and vegetables and other farm products directly to consumers.”

A print by Flemish artist Peter van der Borcht (ca. 1575-1608) depicts a vegetable and meat market in the late 16th or early 17th century.
EARLY RECORDS OF MARKETS IN IOWA

THE HISTORY OF FARMERS MARKETS

November 1866: Pottawattamie County voted for a market house provision.
(History of Pottawattamie County, Iowa by John H. Keatley, OL Baskin, & Co.)
June 1843: Citizens of Dubuque petitioned for a market house. (History of Dubuque County Iowa by Franklin T. Oldt and P.J. Quigley)

February 1845: The question of a market house in Dubuque was considered once again. (History of Dubuque County Iowa by Franklin T. Oldt and P.J. Quigley)

April 1846: Mr. Trower was chosen as the first market master. Stall rental was set at $15 per year—with the best stalls being offered publicly to the highest bidder. Market hours were 3 am to 10 am. Monday through Saturday, May to October. (History of Dubuque County Iowa by Franklin T. Oldt and P.J. Quigley)

New bridges were built on Bluff, Main, Iowa, Clay, Locast and White streets and Lorimer Hollow. In June, 1893, citizens petitioned for the erection of a market house. The city had great need for a market house, and the petition was granted by the city council.

Dubuque’s Famous Market, 7 AM Ready for Business, 1912 (Encyclopedia Dubuque, Courtesy of Randy Lyon)

Dubuque’s Famous Market, A Typical Stand, 1912 (Encyclopedia Dubuque, Courtesy of Randy Lyon)

Dubuque’s Famous Market, 1912 (Encyclopedia Dubuque, Courtesy of Randy Lyon)
FARMERS MARKETS IN IOWA TODAY

ROOM TO GROW

With Iowa’s rich agricultural resources, farmers markets have grown and multiplied across the state—in cities and small towns—in recent decades.

IOWA’S REGISTERED FARMERS MARKETS

Being a “Registered Market” in Iowa means registering with the Iowa Department of Agriculture & Land Stewardship (IDALS). Registered farmers markets are authorized by IDALS to accept FMNP (Farmers Market Nutrition Program) coupons for WIC and Senior FMNP.

LEARN MORE ABOUT BECOMING A REGISTERED MARKET
CHECK OUT OUR “FOOD NUTRITION PROGRAM” SECTION IN CHAPTER 4 ON PAGES 61 - 69.