

SEAPORT FARMERS' MARKET CELEBRATES 265-YEAR ODYSSEY

By Dave Belt

A visit to the bustling Halifax Seaport Farmers' Market along the historic Halifax waterfront is a weekly ritual for many Haligonians and their families. Yet few realize they are participating in a tradition enjoyed by Nova Scotians for an astonishing 265 years – making the Halifax Farmers' Market the longest continuously-operating farmers' market in North America. Like in any good story, there have been several twists and turns along the way.

Our saga begins in 1750. Halifax was a fledgling colony consisting mostly of soldiers, merchants and fishermen. Realizing the importance of securing a supply of fresh food, Governor Edward Cornwallis established a Farmers' Market by Royal Decree, just one year after the establishment of Halifax itself. The initial site was established on George Street, between Bedford Row and Upper Water Street, and was administered by a Board of Commissioners.

In early June of 1750, farmers gathered for what was initially called the "Green Market." Through the years, The Halifax Farmers' Market would come to be known by several other names, including the "Flesh Market," "Meat Market," "Cattle Market," as well as the "Country Market House," "Public Market," and "City Market." Later, another moniker -- "Cheapside Market" – also came into vogue.

In the earliest days of the Halifax Farmers' Market, farmers would come primarily from across the Halifax area and the Eastern Shore. Early morning boats would ferry vendors, along with their carts and wares, from Dartmouth to Halifax. During the day, horses were stabled in a building near the ferry on the Dartmouth side of the harbour. The wagons were pulled onto the ferry by hand and hauled to the market area once the vessel reached its destination.

For the first several years, there were no assigned vending spaces. Farmers and artisans jockeyed for the best locations based simply on earliest arrival. Once a claim was staked, vendors would sell their wares from the back of a horse-drawn wagon or ox-cart.

By the early 1800s, management and administration of the Halifax Farmers' Market was transferred to the Justice of the Peace for the County of Halifax, and eventually to the City of Halifax upon its incorporation in 1842. The charter conveyed ownership of the market facilities to the city "...for the public and common benefit and use of the City of Halifax, according to the true interest and meaning of the original grant."

Just getting to the Halifax Farmers' Market in those early days was a challenge. Those without the convenience of a horse had little choice but to walk to and from the market. This included many industrious women from the Eastern Shore who reportedly travelled upwards of 65 kilometres (41 miles) each way, all on foot, carrying their produce and knitting as they walked.

Winter posed additional challenges in those early pre-automobile days. Snow and ice-covered hills were treacherous for market-goers and their animals, and winter storms could make the country roads impassable.

In addition to meat, poultry, fish, farm produce, and handmade articles of clothing, the Halifax Farmers' Market was a source of other necessities of life. For example, families from the Porter's Lake and Chezzetcook areas would bring firewood to the Market by boat – approximately 2,000 cords annually. Loads of hay were also brought to the Market by boat from the Eastern Shore.

Attending the Halifax Market was a way of life for many of the farmers of this region. There, they would meet up with friends and extended family members and would pick up the latest news. The women would exchange recipes or patterns for clothes and knitted garments. Having sold their wares, they would then buy the essentials they could not produce otherwise, such as sugar, salt, tea, flour, molasses, and kerosene.

By 1800, the Halifax Farmers' Market had expanded to the point of needing to provide vendors with two locations: one was across the street from the original site which came to be known as the "Post Office Market," and the other, referred to as the "Green Market," was located nearby on Bedford Row.

In 1842, popular English author Charles Dickens visited the Halifax Farmers' Market and wrote that it was "...abundantly supplied and exceedingly cheap."

A covered building was constructed in 1854 near the site of the original Halifax Farmers' Market on George Street, where the Bank of Montreal is currently located. The Market remained at the George Street location until 1916, at which time land near the Citadel was purchased by the city.

The Halifax Farmers' Market enjoyed its longest period of stability from 1916 to 1969, when it operated at a dedicated facility operated by the City of Halifax, between Brunswick and Abermarle (now Market) streets. By 1921, the outdoor farmers' market ceased to exist, as every vendor was accommodated within the Brunswick Street building. In the early 1900s, vendors would tether their horses and wagons on Abermarle Street.

The 1960s ushered in an era of change in downtown Halifax. To create a site for what is now Scotia Square, wholesale demolition of the original downtown area of 1749 was undertaken. The Brunswick-Abermarle market facility was demolished in 1969, sending market vendors looking for a new home yet again. At the same time, a revised city charter did not contain specific provisions compelling the City of Halifax to provide space for the market, although civic leaders assured the public that the city would act in the spirit of the old charter.

The lack of a permanent home, compounded by the loss of a governmental sponsor, caused the Halifax Farmers' Market to enter into a period of decline from 1969 to 1983. But even with a

reduced number of vendors, the Halifax Farmers' Market persevered through those lean years, thanks to a core group of farmers and artisans who kept the Market alive. Vendors initially moved to an industrial building on Windsor Street in 1969. By 1977, they were forced to relocate to various other buildings in and around the Halifax Forum, the Civic Arena, and the Devonshire Arena.

This nomadic existence continued until 1983 when vendors moved to the inner courtyard and adjoining chambers of the Alexander Keith's Brewery on Lower Water Street. This facility provided a welcome sanctuary for nearly 27 years. Vendors incorporated as the City Market of Halifax Cooperative (CMHC) in 1982. Under this legal entity and over a period of several years, members raised working capital to construct a \$12-million dedicated facility on the Halifax waterfront, just eight blocks from the original 1750s-era site. The Halifax Seaport Farmers' Market officially opened for business on August 7, 2010. After operating at 14 separate locations over the course of 260 years, the search for a permanent home had finally been achieved.

In 2012, CMHC disbanded and the Halifax Port Authority was invited to assume operational control of the Halifax Seaport Farmers' Market, providing vendors with a benefactor to oversee operational and administrative needs. As a result, farmers and artisans are now able to focus entirely on what they do best: provide the people of Halifax and Nova Scotia with fresh and delicious top quality food, and unique artisanal products and crafts.

Even though the name and location have changed over the years, the tradition of a weekly trek to the Halifax Farmers' Market has remained consistent from one generation to the next. For many, a trip to the Market is just as important today as it was during colonial times. We hope you will join us in celebrating our first 265 years!