

History of Olympia Farmers Market

May 2025

Humble Beginnings

One of the first farmers markets in Olympia operated out of a retired horse shed. The site was selected “after efforts to obtain other and more favorable sites failed,” according to a November 4, 1934 article in *The Daily Olympian*. On the market’s opening Saturday, October 26, 1929, nine farmers brought goods to sell. W.M. Dobbs brought in one dozen chickens and was sold out and packed up before the end of the first hour. H.D. Bushman brought one sack of early potatoes and sold all but \$0.25 worth. Bushman is quoted as saying, “I could have sold a ton by the sack had I had the potatoes here.”



Handwritten script reads, “Olympia Farmers Market—at the end of Legion Way at Water Street, 1930”

This iteration of the farmers market existed on Olympia’s downtown waterfront on Legion Way from 1929 through 1945. There had been earlier attempts to establish a public market in the young town. A 1912 article in the *Olympia Recorder* promoted the opening of a market that began that year:

“Mayor Bridgford and members of the city council are confident [the market] will be a great success and are trusting the ranchers of the vicinity will be on hand with their supplies of vegetables and other farm products of all kinds. It is the universal opinion that Olympia householders will patronize the market if the ranchers are in a position to supply their demands.”

Early farmers markets in Olympia were created in response to demand from a community seeking low-cost groceries and farmers wanting to sell their crops for more than what they could earn at wholesale price. The best way to do this was to establish a direct line of sale between farmers and shoppers. Purchasing from your neighbors is a value that has endured and re-inspired generations across the last century.

Returning to Lost Values

In the early 1940s, the waterfront farmers market was forced to close. New health regulations required refrigeration for meats and dairy, and the large investment in the necessary equipment was more than the farmers could afford.

The 1970s saw the emergence of a new cohort of Olympians that rejected industrial agriculture and processed foods, and instead sought the fresh, locally-produced ingredients that their grandparents grew up with. Food buying groups emerged as one solution. These groups connected neighbors to make bulk grocery purchases, allowing low-income buyers cheap access to local produce and nutritious foods. Weekly, bulk orders were made with local growers and produce distributors. Members of the buying clubs would then meet at a neighbor's house to distribute the produce to those who had requested specific items. The Olympia Food Conspiracy and Foote Street Buying Club were among the groups established in the Olympia area. Members of these groups would go on to establish the Olympia Food Coop and the Olympia Farmers Market.

The structure of food buying groups shifted over time. Many members eventually began growing their own produce and sought to share their surplus with their neighbors. In the summer of 1974, Mary Towne, who would later become the first president of Olympia Farmers Market, did exactly this. Those who were there remember Mary as one of the few who set up a card table in front of the Senior Center and gave away produce to neighbors and friends who passed by. When Mary was informed she would need a peddler's license to sell on City sidewalks, she developed a workaround, telling those who insisted on paying to make a donation to the Senior Center. Staff from the Senior Center eventually became tired of the stream of small donations and purchased a peddler's license on Mary's behalf.

The following year, in 1975, a group of Olympians met at the Olympia Community Center to plan a new farmers market. Articles of incorporation for "The Farmers Market" were amended from the Olympia Food Conspiracy's original articles. The new market would share the Food Conspiracy's goal of: "providing the community access to high quality food at affordable prices." That May the farmers market returned to Olympia. This was made possible by volunteers from groups like the Retired Senior Volunteer Program and the Low Housing Coalition, as well as a start-up fund of \$500.00 that had been earned the previous summer by Mary Towne's sidewalk sales.

The Market first opened at Pacific Avenue and Sleater Kinney (near the present day Panorama retirement community) after a failed request to the Thurston County Commissioners to host the Market at the former Drivers' License Building at 503 4th Ave

W. But market organizers were determined to bring the Market back to the Olympia waterfront where it had been in the early 1900s.



Image from July 18, 1976 issue of The Olympian. Original caption reads, "Market Crew Sets Up: Standing (L): President Lu Hall, Growers Paul Klotzner and Lou Johns, Kneeling: Volunteer Mary Towne, Manager Claudia Sepp, Growers Dave Howard and Lee Blankenship."

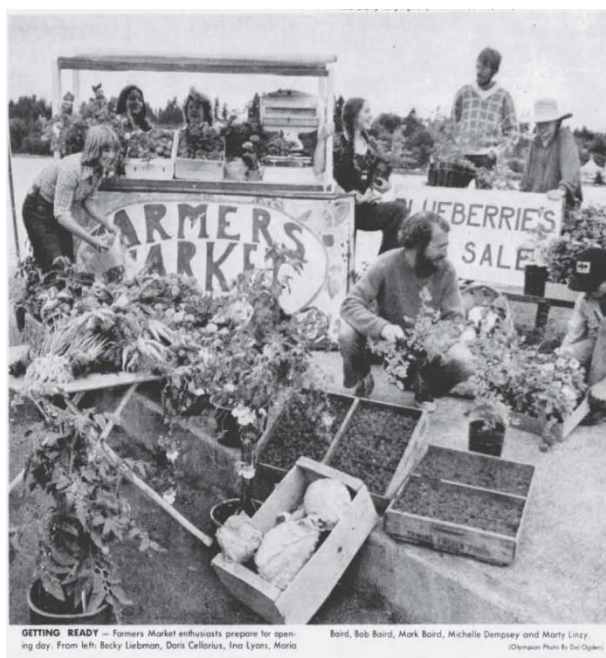


Image from the July 14, 1977 issue of The Olympian. Original caption reads, "Getting Ready--Farmers Market enthusiasts prepare for opening day. From left: Becky Liebman, Doris Cellarius, Ina Lyons, Maria Baird, Bob Baird, Mark Baird, Michelle Dempsey and Marty Linzy."

Market on the Move

From 1976-1977, the Market returned to Capitol Lake Park, the same site that the 1929 farmers market had been prior to the park's establishment. There were reportedly 50 vendors selling farm and garden goods in 1976, a significant increase from the 18 vendors who sold the inaugural year. Anyone selling produce could rent space for \$0.50 a day. Those who needed space to sell out of their car or truck paid an additional \$0.50. Market organizers sold \$1.00 annual memberships to vendors and shoppers to cover operating costs. An article published in a July 1976 issue of the Olympian noted that "the membership fee could also be paid in produce" (but did not specify how that produce would be attributed to supporting the Market's operating costs). It is likely that this produce was given to the local food bank because the Market was regularly donating leftover goods as part of their mission to provide produce to low-income people. To further encourage the sale of memberships, the Market's 1976 Annual Meeting Minutes

shared that, “Ruth Lee had donated a beautiful handmade quilt” and that the quilt would be presented to a lucky Market member.

By the end of 1977, concern from the City Parks Director that the Market was killing the grass spurred another move. In 1978, the Market opened at the “Western Farmers” parking lot, located on 8th and Plum Street, across from the old Olympia City Hall. By 1980, the community had funded the construction of two structures to shelter 24 vendor stall spaces. The bulk of funds were raised through a strawberry shortcake festival, which would become an annual Market tradition hosted almost every year through 2023. An article from the Daily Olympian on July 29, 1981, highlighted Greek pastries, pottery finished with glaze made of ash from the Mount St. Helen’s eruption, and “exotic honey varieties such as Scotch Broom.”

The Farmer’s Market operated on Plum Street through 1983 until the sale of the lot forced another move. The Market’s positive impact on Olympia was now noticed by neighboring towns, and the Market had its pick of new locations. Tumwater City Council discussed placing the Market at the new Deschutes River Park. South Sound Center in Lacey offered a location on Sleater Kinney Street, a half block from the Market’s original 1975 home. The City of Olympia showed interest in leasing land to the Market and eventually paid to construct a new shelter for the Market on Thurston Avenue to house the Market site.

Some who were there recall this period as rife with tensions. Memories of previous City Council members’ lack of support for the Market and recent conflict with their landlord on Plum Street had swayed a majority of vendors to seek a new home in Lacey, but Olympia remained appealing for its location and the potential to be part of Percival Landing Park. Following an alleged series of internal events, including heated discussions, hairsplitting votes, miscommunication with City staff, and the resignation and return of a valued Board Member, the Farmers Market would occupy two locations in 1984. On Wednesdays and Saturdays, the Market would be located in Lacey. On Fridays and Sundays, the Market would operate in Olympia. That year, the City of Olympia assigned staff to operate a Saturday Market to fill its absence



Shoppers visit the Farmers Market at the Thurston Avenue location. The Market was located here from 1984-1995.

before the Farmers Market was persuaded to add Saturdays back to its Olympia operational schedule in 1985. The Lacey location ceased to operate shortly after the return to Saturdays in Olympia. The Farmers Market continued operating solely at the Thurston Avenue location through 1995.

The Thurston Avenue location, owned by Yardbirds, was subleased by the City of Olympia to the Market for \$1.00 per year. The Market community felt it had found its permanent home until 1993 when Yardbirds announced that they were selling their land. The Market would have to move again. When it was discovered that the site's soil was contaminated with petroleum products from past land uses, the City of Olympia offered a deal to the potential buyers and Yardbirds to partially cover the cost of clean-up in exchange for the Market being allowed to remain through 1995.

In 1994, City Council brought the issue of funding the construction of a new farmers



Text reads: "Save Our Market, Yes on Proposition 1, Paid for by Friends of the Olympia Farmers Market, 2103 Harrison NW Suite 2377, Olympia WA 98502"

market building to the ballot. Proponents argued that the structure would benefit shoppers and provide a comfortable place to shop protected from the seasonal rain. City Council pledged to find a way to financially support the new building regardless of the vote's outcome. A "Save the Market" campaign organized by the Friends of the Farmers Market rallied supporters, leafletted, and encouraged a letter-writing campaign to The Olympian. The proposed \$850,000 bond would have cost Olympia homeowners \$5.00 a year per \$100,000 in property value over ten years.

The bond needed a 60% vote of support to pass but came up just short at 58%. Two weeks later, City Council voted 5-1 to fully fund the construction anyway using Council-approved funds.

In 1995, construction began on the new farmers market building designed by local architect Morton James III. The Port of Olympia leased the land to the City who in turn subleased it to the Market. The Market would be responsible for the cost of all building maintenance in addition to



A crowd gathers outside the south entrance for the Market's grand opening celebration on April 6, 1996.

paying an annual lease and payments to retire the bond for the new building. The building was completed in 1996. Vendor volunteers planted trees and flowers, erected signs, and painted the new barn structure prior to opening day for the 1996 season.

Modern Governance

For its first five years, the Farmers Market was organized by a handful of volunteers.

THIS FORM MUST BE RETURNED FOR FILING BEFORE MARCH 1.
AS OUTLINED IN RCW 24.03.302, NON-PROFIT CORPORATIONS FAILING TO FILE AN ANNUAL REPORT SHALL LOSE THEIR CORPORATE STATUS.

* STATE OR COUNTRY OF INCORPORATION	Washington															
* FOREIGN CORPORATIONS ONLY ADDRESS OF PRINCIPAL OFFICE IN STATE OR COUNTRY OF INCORPORATION																
* BRIEFLY STATE THE CHARACTER OF THE BUSINESS WHICH THIS CORPORATION IS ACTUALLY CONDUCTING IN THE STATE OF WASHINGTON.	To provide fresh, locally grown produce at reasonable prices to residents of this community. To provide a place where local growers can sell their crops.															
* NAMES AND ADDRESSES OF OFFICERS AND DIRECTORS OF THIS CORPORATION	<table border="1"> <tr> <td>PRESIDENT</td> <td>Mary Towne</td> <td>RSVP</td> </tr> <tr> <td>VICE PRESIDENT</td> <td>Homer Hedgpeth</td> <td>Address: "</td> </tr> <tr> <td>SECRETARY</td> <td>Claudia Sepp</td> <td>Address: "</td> </tr> <tr> <td>TREASURER</td> <td>Ruth Lee</td> <td>Address: "</td> </tr> <tr> <td>DIRECTORS</td> <td colspan="2">Mary Towne, Homer Hedgpeth, Claudia Sepp, Ruth Lee, Steve Wilcox, John D. Angelo, Paul Klotzner, Dick Hinkle</td> </tr> </table>	PRESIDENT	Mary Towne	RSVP	VICE PRESIDENT	Homer Hedgpeth	Address: "	SECRETARY	Claudia Sepp	Address: "	TREASURER	Ruth Lee	Address: "	DIRECTORS	Mary Towne, Homer Hedgpeth, Claudia Sepp, Ruth Lee, Steve Wilcox, John D. Angelo, Paul Klotzner, Dick Hinkle	
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* THIS REPORT MUST BE SIGNED BY A PRESIDENT, VICE-PRESIDENT, ASSISTANT SECRETARY OR TREASURER OF THE CORPORATION
ALL INFORMATION SHALL BE GIVEN AS OF THE DATE OF EXECUTION

4/18/75 Claudia Sepp Secretary

* THE UNDERSIGNED A NOTARY PUBLIC, IN AND FOR THE STATE OF WASHINGTON, HEREBY CERTIFIES THAT ON 4/18/75 PERSONALLY APPEARED BEFORE ME Claudia Sepp WHO BEING BY ME FIRST DULY SWORN, DECLARED THAT HE IS THE OF THE FOREGOING CORPORATION, THAT HE SIGNED THE FOREGOING DOCUMENT AND THAT THE STATEMENTS THEREIN CONTAINED ARE TRUE.

Rossie J. Gaud
NOTARY PUBLIC IN AND FOR THE STATE OF WASHINGTON
RESIDING AT Olympia

FILE WITH SECRETARY OF STATE BEFORE MARCH 1. FILING FEE \$1.00 — PAYABLE TO SECRETARY OF STATE.
SSP 179 (10-9-74) ②

The Market's Annual Report from 1975 stating the purpose of the organization as "To provide fresh, locally grown produce at reasonable prices to residents of the community. To provide a place where local growers can sell their crops."

Handwritten annual reports to Washington's Secretary of State were adapted from the Olympia Food Conspiracy's original reports and provided various answers to the organization's purpose, ranging from providing food "at low cost to low-income people" to providing "low cost high quality foods and other essentials of life and ... education on efficient life giving systems of life," to simply "farmers market." The variations over the years provide a sometimes humorous glimpse into their evolving priorities. In 1981, "crafts" were mentioned for the first time on the report and clarified that all goods sold would be crafted by the sellers themselves.

As the market grew and formalized, so did its organizational structure. In the early 1980s, it was decided that board members must be vendors at the Market. The vendors would elect one another to serve their interests. Another key issue was the Market's allowance of resellers. In 1982, in an effort to emphasize the production of local goods, the Market Board added a provision to their bylaws requiring that vendors must produce at least 75% of their products for sale. The remaining 25% could be products they didn't grow, provided those products did not compete with local farmers. This greatly reduced reselling, a decision that upset some vendors and empowered others. In 1984 the Market again updated their rules to require that anyone considered a farmer produce 100% of their products.

Today, the Market is governed by a seven-person Board of Directors comprised of vendors and operated by a small staff team. Vendors must produce their goods for sale in Thurston, Lewis, Mason, or Grays Harbor Counties and all goods must be produced

by the vendor. Eastern Washington fruit is allowed to be resold on a contract basis to supply produce not widely grown in Western Washington.

In recent decades, the stability of the Market's current home at the end of Capitol Way has allowed it to expand and evolve. As the community has changed, the Market has changed with it. In response to rising costs for farmers and consumers, the Market now participates in national food access nutrition programs like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), SNAP for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the Senior & WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program, and SNAP Market Match to provide senior citizens, young families, and children affordable access to high quality fresh foods. The Market today is open year-round with three distinct seasons, boasting regularly scheduled community workshops and events, daily live music, and eight on-site restaurants.

Spirit of '75

The uncertainty of where the Market would be located caused considerable turmoil for market organizers, vendors, and shoppers. But the Market bloomed thanks to collaborative efforts by those who were passionate about seeing it succeed. A rotating cast of volunteers stepped up to keep the Market alive in the early days. Volunteers recruited new vendors by cold-calling friends who had surplus garden produce, listed classified ads in *The Olympian* to promote the arrival of highly desired crops, and hand-built shelters to cover vendor displays from rain.

Today, the spirit of the Market is still the community of those who shop, vend, and pass through each week. In doing so, we remember the people who made the very first move—the one to start a farmers market in Olympia.



Dan's Dahlias sells cut flowers at the Thurston Avenue location. The business has continued to operate through 2025.



Shoppers wait in line at Bavarian Wurst. Madeline's Bavarian Wurst was the first restaurant established at the Market and continues to operate yearround today.

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