

## From Market to Garden

The Jefferson Market Garden is bounded by Greenwich Avenue, West 10th Street and Sixth Avenue. Since 1833, fishmongers, fire watchers, judges, prisoners, librarians, gardeners and others have worked or lived on this small triangular city block at one time or another. In that year the block was first developed as the Jefferson Market to supply the food needs of the ever-growing population of Greenwich Village. The block's triangular shape, unusual in a city of right angles, resulted from its location at the intersection of the ordered 1811 street grid to the east of Sixth Avenue with the older, circuitous street layout of the Village neighborhood to the west.

The evolution of this parcel of land from a food market to a library and garden is fascinating and complex. Here is a chronology of how it happened:

**1833** Jefferson Market opened. The market, named for Thomas Jefferson, grew rapidly to include fishmongers, poultry vendors and hucksters. The growth in the area's activity prompted fire safety concerns and a wooden lookout tower with a bell was erected. A small prison was also constructed.

**1845** The NYC Police Department was established and the market became the headquarters of one of the city's first police courts.

**1851** The wooden fire tower burned down and was subsequently replaced with another wooden tower.

**1865** The volunteer fire department was abolished by a state act which created the Metropolitan Fire District and the Metropolitan Fire Department. "Old Jeff's" bell became obsolete.

**1870** The legislature in Albany decided to construct a new municipal building on the site of the original market. By 1873, the plans for Jefferson Market Courthouse hit a snag; \$150,000 had already been spent on materials that sat rotting in a pile for years. It was a graft scheme of Boss Tweed, one of his last swindles before being removed from office and imprisoned.

**1877** The courthouse with bell tower was completed from designs by Frederick Clarke Withers and Calvert Vaux (co-creator of Central Park) in Victorian and Venetian Gothic styles. The New York Times reported that the courthouse was beautiful and described it as "a jewel in a swine's snout," reflecting upon the seedy area in which it was located. A jail of similar architectural design opened the following year.

**1883** A masonry market building designed by Douglas Smythe filled the remainder of the Jefferson Market site, replacing the market's old sheds.

**1885** Readers of *The American Architect and Building News* voted the courthouse the fifth most beautiful building in the United States.

**1927** By this time the jail and courthouse were used only for trials of women, becoming locally known as "the lady's courthouse." The jail was now described as "dungeon-like," and it was decided that both jail and market would be demolished in favor of the Women's House of Detention.

**1932** The Women's House of Detention opened, ushering in "a new era in penology." The goal was the moral and social rehabilitation of women.

**1945** The district court system was overhauled and the Jefferson Market Courthouse ceased being a courthouse. Various municipal agencies in need of cheap, temporary shelter used the space. The

building began a slow descent into disrepair. With stones and copper molding falling from the tower, the building was abandoned by **1958** and was slated for auction by the city.

**1960** Community groups persuaded Mayor Robert F. Wagner and James Felt, chairman of the City Planning Commission, to withdraw the courthouse from sale and provide funds for its conversion by the New York Public Library into a much-needed branch.

**1967** The Jefferson Market branch of the New York Public Library opened after restoration by architect Giorgio Cavaglieri.

Meanwhile, over time, the Women's House of Detention experienced its own descent, and by the **1950s and 1960s**, cases of inmate mistreatment became known. The surrounding neighborhood also suffered as individual relations, friends, and others gathered on the streets outside the prison, sometimes in very large groups to demonstrate support for a certain inmate.

**1971** The Women's House of Detention officially closed, and in **1974** it was demolished. The land was transferred to the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation, and a newly-formed committee of local residents became its stewards.

**1975** Jefferson Market Garden's first flowers bloomed. Landscape architect Pamela Berdan designed the garden in the spirit of Frederick Law Olmsted, who co-designed Central and Prospect Parks with Calvert Vaux. The Garden was planted with 10 Star and Saucer Magnolia trees, 7 Yoshino Cherry trees, 2 American Yellowwoods, 7 Thornless Honeylocusts, 10 Crabapple trees, 70 fairy hedge roses around the lawn, 60 pyracantha, and 56 holly bushes in clusters. Volunteers have since planted tulips, daffodils, and crocuses in the Garden.

<http://www.nycgovparks.org/about/history/historical-signs/listings?id=7729>

**1999** The Garden's one full-time employee, Susan Sipos, a horticulturist began refurbishing and redesigning. Over the years she enriched and enhanced the rubble-based soils, and created a central grassy area. She changed colors and textures, and opened the tree canopy areas for both sunlight and shade. Sipos was not at all responsible for some of the items that have been discovered in the Garden. These include a gun with bullets to match, several shoes and several radios, a bottle with crossbars signifying poison and a knife.

[http://thevillager.com/villager\\_104/wherethehouseofd.html](http://thevillager.com/villager_104/wherethehouseofd.html)

**2004** Cynthia Nixon's Sex and the City character, Miranda, and her character's boyfriend, Steve, get married in the garden.

**2015** The Garden celebrated its 40th Anniversary.