

Bassett's Ice Cream Store:  
Over a Century of Philadelphia Tradition

"My advice to you is not to inquire why or whither, but  
just enjoy your ice cream while it's on your plate--  
that's my philosophy."

-Thorton Niven Wilder  
The Skin of Our Teeth<sup>1</sup>

Although we did not take Mr. Wilder's advice of not asking "why or whither," our group did enjoy the ice cream on our plates--or more accurately, in our cups and cones--as we studied the Bassett's ice cream stand located in Reading Terminal Market. We found the answers to our questions through personal interviews, historical texts, museum exhibits, census data, maps, and observations of the site. We learned that while Bassett's is located in a relatively small census district which is not highly populated and dominated by businesses, it is not limited to this area. Rather, it's central downtown location and proximity to mass transit stations, make it easily accessible to a large percentage of the city's population. We also discovered that Bassett's ice cream stand has historically played an important socioeconomic role in the immediate Terminal area, the surrounding business districts, and also, the entire city. Along with the other stands in the market, it has been described as "a center where urban and rural worlds meet and

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<sup>1</sup> John Bartlett, Familiar Quotations, 16th ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1992), 320.

Philadelphians from all neighborhoods and walks of life converge."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Bassett's ice cream--along with cheese steaks and pretzels--has become a gastronomic symbol for the city. Thus, the "why or whither" of Bassett's ice cream stand reveals that it has economic, cultural, and social ties with both the past, present, and future of the entire city of Philadelphia.

Although having occupied different stands within the space, "there has been a Bassett's Ice Cream stand in the Reading Terminal Market since it opened on February 23, 1993."<sup>3</sup> Located on Market Street between 11th and 12th Streets, the Market was the result of a compromise made between the merchants of the two markets which had occupied the site since 1860 and the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad officials who sought to build a new terminal in the same location. The merchants were given the space below the large train shed which extended from Arch Street to the "Head House" located on Market Street. Comprised of passenger waiting rooms, shops, and railroad company offices, the Head House was built in a "florid Renaissance style...executed in rich cream-colored terra cotta on buff brick."<sup>4</sup> The arched train shed behind it, however, was the real architectural and engineering marvel as it was the "largest single-span structure in the world"<sup>5</sup> upon its completion. Although the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad went out of business some years

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<sup>2</sup> Reading Terminal Market: Source of the Main Food Supply of Philadelphia, exhibit at the Atwater Kent Museum, 15 South 7th Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, through December 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Atwater Kent Museum.

<sup>4</sup> Richard J. Webster, Philadelphia Preserved (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1976) 115.

<sup>5</sup> John L. Cotter, Daniel G. Roberts, and Michael Parrington, The Buried Past (Philadelphia: U of Philadelphia P, 1992) 297.

later, the Reading Terminal Market continued to thrive as a central food warehouse.

When it was built, the Market occupied an area of 78,000 square feet. The "original plan laid out more than 1,200 stands in a grid-like fashion of twelve aisles and four thoroughfares."<sup>6</sup> Cold storage facilities, such as the ones used by Bassett's, were originally located in the basement of the building, and to absorb the moisture created by such facilities, sawdust was spread over the market floor. In addition, before an air-conditioning system was installed, "ceiling fans circulated the air and shooed the flies."<sup>7</sup> The large windows in the outside walls originally provided most of the lighting for the market stalls. By 1913, "250 specialized dealers and 100 farmers occupied its stalls."<sup>8</sup> Although not as large as the original plans had intended, the Reading Terminal Market--promoting itself as the "'Source of the Main Food Supply of Philadelphia's and Adjacent Territory'"<sup>9</sup> --nonetheless thrived. By the 1960's, however, poor maintenance led to the physical and economic decline of the Market. For example, "the roof leaked, building code violations abounded, and rats appeared after the cold storage system was removed from the basement."<sup>10</sup> With the recent renovations of the downtown area and the construction of the new Convention Center, the Reading Terminal Market (now with approximately seventy stalls) is today

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<sup>6</sup> Atwater Kent Museum.

<sup>7</sup> Atwater Kent Museum.

<sup>8</sup> Atwater Kent Museum.

<sup>9</sup> Atwater Kent Museum.

<sup>10</sup> Atwater Kent Museum.

experiencing a revival of its original popularity and economic prosperity.

Since Bassett's has been in the Market since its founding, it has weathered the same developments, hardships, and changes. The company was established in 1861 by Louis Dubois Bassett on a farm in Salem, New Jersey and moved into Reading Terminal Market a year later. The ice cream was originally made and stored in the large freezers located below the stand in the basement of the Market and used the various fruits, nuts, and spices sold by other Market merchants. Like the other merchants', Bassett's sold its products to "restaurants, hotels, steamship lines, hospitals, golf, town and country clubs, municipal buildings, cafeterias, and of course, the dining cars of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad."<sup>11</sup> Today, the ice cream is still sold in a variety of locations such as hotels in Philadelphia and independent restaurants in cities such as Chicago and New York; however, it is now made in Johnstown, Pennsylvania and distributed out of Burlington, New Jersey. Thus, the ice cream must be transported to the original stand as well as to the other distant locations.

The Bassett's stand in the Market is located along the outside wall of the Market and, through a large window, looks out onto 12th Street. It sits next to the current area of renovation and, consequently, ladders and dusty wooden boards lean on nearby walls. Within the stand, a short flight of stairs leads to a small upstairs office space for company employees, and overhead, a colorful mural shows a variety of Bassett's customers eating ice

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<sup>11</sup> Atwater Kent Museum.

cream. Its most notable characteristic, however, is the original, L-shaped marble counter on which ice cream has been served since the stand opened in 1862. Originally, customers would wait at the counter in one line "to purchase a ticket, then get in another line for ice cream."<sup>12</sup> Before ice cream cones and Styrofoam cups appeared, only glass dishes were used at the Bassett's stand. "Servers sent dishes sliding along the counter to stop in front of the appropriate customers until an unfortunate accident with a dish of chocolate ice cream."<sup>13</sup> Today, cones, cups, and dishes are all used; however, as a sign in the store announces, dishes are given top priority during the crowded lunch hours. This "dish only" rule not only helps alleviate crowd congestion but also promotes good relations with the Bassett's regulars who typically like to eat a dish of their favorite flavor while sitting at the marble counter. Thus, amid a changing physical environment, Bassett's ice cream stand retains its characteristic social, economic, and historical connections within--and even beyond--the city of Philadelphia.

Bassett's Ice Cream functions as an anchor to both its immediate and extended urban neighborhood. The social context of Bassett's is firstly defined by its relationship to the rest of Reading Terminal Market, secondly to the immediate business district that surrounds it, and lastly as a cultural icon for the entire city. Moreover, it has both economic and personal importance to the

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<sup>12</sup> Atwater Kent Museum.

<sup>13</sup> Atwater Kent Museum.

neighborhood. Thus, in its relationships and contexts Bassett's Ice Cream functions on a number of levels.

The movement of Bassett's into the market upon the completion of the terminal in 1892 shaped, in many ways, the workings the rest of the market. In numerous regards, it symbolizes a certain permanence in the market. For example, it still has the original marble counter from the date of its founding, and after five generations, it is still family owned. In observing the behavior of the various merchants at the market, it became clear that there exists a neighborly relationship between them. As we interviewed people in the market we discovered that there is a type of self-contained network among the people who work at the market. For many of the workers, the market is not only their work place, but it is also the place where they eat and gather with their friends from other stores. Thus, there exists a definite social network among the different stores and their employees. As we sat at the Bassett's counter, for example, people repeatedly came by to visit Eric and Gary, the cashiers at Bassett's, and discuss the day's business and the happenings at the market. These personal relationships extended to all levels of employees and even the management in the stores. When Mr. Strange, a fifth generation Bassett, visited, he discussed business and caught up on the gossip of the terminal with the other store keepers.

This atmosphere of familiarity extended to the relationship between Bassett's and its customers. For example, we talked to a gentleman who has been coming to Bassett's for thirty years. Eric knew him well as well as all his favorite flavors. In talking with Mr.

Strange, we learned of people who had been regulars at Bassett's for seventy years and had been served by his grandfather. Mr. Strange spoke extensively about the importance they place on maintaining such regular customers and measures they have implemented to keep them returning. For example, they have recently instituted a Frequent Licker Club, in which regulars can get one free cone for every ten they buy. Through such efforts, Bassett's actively fosters the familiarity it has with its customers.

Bassett's is also a mainstay of the business district that surrounds the market. For example, during peak lunch hours workers from nearby office building flock to Bassett's. Consequently, no one with a cone or cup may sit at the counter and only those ordering dishes of ice cream are allowed the coveted seating area. Later on in the afternoon, crowds again accumulate as people coming from work stop in and get a pint of ice cream to bring home. Business people are not the only customers of Bassett's, many school children come after school as well as the older residents of the community who have been frequenting Bassett's for decades. While sitting at the Bassett's counter we truly found a great cross section of the community.

Bassett's relationship extends not only to its immediate geographical area of center city Philadelphia but also extends to a much wider social context. Talking with customers, we were told many fascinating stories involving Bassett's ice cream and dry ice being transported to various parts of the United States. One customer's brother who comes up from Dallas, orders eight quarts of Bassett's ice cream and dry ice in order to transport it safely back

home. We also met a customer who was buying ice cream and dry ice so she could take it to a sick friend in another state.

Bassett's is in many ways a cultural icon of Philadelphia. Repeatedly we heard stories of customers who traditionally brought their visitors to the market to, "get a cheese steak and go to Bassett's," which they considered to be a taste of Philadelphia. Moreover, since the store has been in business for more than a century, it symbolizes the economic prosperity and historical continuity which the rest of the city is trying to secure.

Although the market and Bassett's have been a fixture of downtown Philadelphia for more than one hundred years, its neighborhood is now undergoing the stressful process of transformation and revitalization. The construction of the Philadelphia Convention Center and the Downtown Marriott, while bringing in new clientele, threatens to destroy the carefully fostered familiar atmosphere at Bassett's. Mr. Strange spoke with great concern about the future of Bassett's in terms of these new developments. He worries that although many new customers will come to taste this Philadelphia tradition, they will only be "one timers" briefly passing through the market. Moreover, he fears that his regulars will be afraid to come down because of the crowds of tourists. This fear extends to the rest of the market. The merchants worry that, "regular customers and conventioners will soon meet in the market and depending on the day of the week ... may be in each other's way. White metal lunch tables [and counter space] may become more scarce."<sup>14</sup> In addition to such problematic crowd

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<sup>14</sup> Atwater Kent Museum.

dynamics, economic changes also concern market merchants. As a result, merchants have made agreements with the building owners to protect themselves," from short term rent increases, lease turnovers, and remodeling the market into a conventioners food court."<sup>15</sup> So although the tourists may bring in more revenue for Bassett's, Mr. Strange and the Bassett's employees still remain very fearful of losing the atmosphere they have spent one hundred years cultivating.

We found that one of the most wonderful parts of eating ice cream at Bassett's was the familiar atmosphere and the tradition that is inherent in every part of store -- the original marble counter tops and overhead murals and the recipes conceived in the market's basement by Mr. Strange's great-grandfather. The revitalization of this area may, in fact, destroy what has made Bassett's such a vital part of its social neighborhood.

Locating Bassett's Ice Cream in a service space presents some interesting problems because of the nature of the store. For example it is located in center city and is surrounded by office, not residential space. In addition, since it is a single stand in a large market, it functions differently than an independent establishment would. As a result some basic service categories are totally irrelevant to Bassett's, while others are very important.

Since Bassett's is located in Reading Terminal Market, which is primarily filled with food stands, it is surrounded by its closest food

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<sup>15</sup> Atwater Kent Museum.

market. This is of essential importance to Bassett's. At first it seems that all the other stands would compete with Bassett's, but rather they help bring business to the store. Bassett's is the only full time, quality ice cream store in the market, so it does not face direct competition. Instead, Bassett's shares a symbiotic relationship with other stands. For example, customers may come to buy a sandwich from one stand, flowers from another, and then get ice cream from Bassett's.

The area in which the terminal is located has historically been known as a high crime area. "In the late nineteenth century... as the area grew increasingly commercial, burlesque theaters, houses of prostitution, and cheap rooming houses and hotels became more numerous."<sup>16</sup> Such establishments contributed to the rise in criminal activity. In the last several years, however, the area has been under renovation. The market is being rebuilt and the new convention center is nearing completion. The city has invested a lot of money in making the area both aesthetically pleasing and also psychologically attractive. City officials realize that shoppers and convention center tourists will not want to shop if they are afraid of crime. Thus, the nearby police station keeps a strong presence in the area. The nearest station is at 925 Filbert St. The police are very important to Bassett's because they ensure customer safety, encouraging them to make repeated visits.

Public transportation is very close to Bassett's. The bus terminal is at Filbert and 10th, just across the street. More importantly, the Market East SEPTA station is at Market and 11th

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<sup>16</sup> Cotter, Roberts, Parrington, 297.

Streets, only a block away from the Reading Terminal Market. This means that the Market and, of course, Bassett's are easy to get to for anyone in Philadelphia and the surrounding suburbs. People with or without cars can easily go to the market to eat and shop. The SEPTA station opens the market to large portions of the population, and it keeps the clientele varied. The Bassett's employees described at length the different types of people that came to eat ice cream and during our visits we saw a sampling of this diverse clientele.

Bassett's customers come from all areas of Philadelphia, all socioeconomic levels, and a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The station is particularly important because, it is primarily an area of business and not many people live near the Reading Terminal Market. Bassett's could not rely on people living within walking distance for business and the station is what makes it accessible by all of Philadelphia.

The closest schools are Thomas Jefferson University along 10th and 11th Streets, McCall Elementary School at 6th and Spruce, and Parkway Zeta Senior High School at 13th and Cherry. As places of education, they do not affect Bassett's much, but as sources of young people they do affect business at the store. For example, when the school day is over, students may go to Bassett's to satisfy their sweet tooth and talk with friends before heading home. These schools do provide young customers, but according to Bassett's employees, students are a minority. Thus, the schools do have an affect on Bassett's, but not a very large one.

There is a Border's book store in the Reading Terminal Market. It is close and easy to get to from Bassett's, but has little affect on the

ice cream stand. The closest hospital is the Thomas Jefferson University Hospital which stretches from Chestnut to Walnut on 10th Street. This is accessible for anyone choking on an ice cream cone, but otherwise does not affect Bassett's.

The closest movie theaters that we could locate are at 2nd and Spruce and at 19th and Chestnut, neither of which is very close. Because of the distance, the theaters probably do not have a big affect on Bassett's. Frequently, ice cream stores are located next to movie theaters, serving as a hangout before or after shows. However, there is no relationship like this with Bassett's.

The closest post office is at 9th and Chestnut. A Bassett's employee may go here to mail a letter before or after work, but Bassett's official mail is handled through their downtown office. Thus, the post office has almost no relation to Bassett's.

The closest social service agency is Planned Parenthood at 11th and Filbert. Also, City Hall at Market and Broad is close to Bassett's. Besides bringing potential customers into the area, neither of these places play a large factor in the functioning of Bassett's.

The final service category that needs to be addressed is a bit unusual. Even though they do not fall into any conventional categories, the Marriott and the Philadelphia Convention Center will have a huge impact on the Reading Terminal Market. They will have both a quantitative and a qualitative impact on Bassett's. The hotel and the Convention Center will bring many people to Philadelphia, and more specifically, to the Reading Terminal Market. The Convention Center is actually attached to the Market by a covered walkway, and the Marriott is not much further away. This will

greatly increase the number of customers for Bassett's. These customers, in particular, will eat out a lot and will turn to accessible options, with Bassett's being a prime recipient of new business. In addition to the change in the number of people that will come to Bassett's, the demographics will also be much different. Bassett's employees expressed concern that regular customers will be pushed out by crowds of loud, hungry conventioners. Bassett's could lose its place as a slice of Philadelphia and become just a small ice cream stand in a big town. Bassett's has carved out a position in the ice cream market and the Convention Center could hurt Bassett's long term reputation, even though it may bring increased business in the short term.

Bassett's Ice Cream is located in census district five. The borders of district five are Arch street to the north, Chestnut street to the south, 15th street to the west and 7th street to the east. It is a small area, encompassing approximately  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile by  $\frac{1}{4}$  of a mile. The residential population is unusually low for a center city. This small population size can be attributed to the fact that the district encompasses an extremely large portion of Philadelphia's central business district in which there are few residential areas. Since the census gives a perspective of the residential population of a given area, it is not as useful for studying district five as in for other parts of Philadelphia. It does give some insight into who and what the area -- more specifically, Bassett's -- depends on to be

productive and successful. Thus, the census statistics are worth considering and evaluating in a more general sense.

The total population of district five is 1,120 inhabitants. It is a relatively middle-aged population, with few children under the age of 18. The 1990 census data is not particularly striking when considered alone. Median incomes are slightly above the 1986 national average, and there are not any unusual majority populations (for example, there might have been a larger Asian population due to the proximity to Chinatown).<sup>17</sup> When compared with the 1980 census however, some interesting characteristics appear. These characteristics fall mainly within the categories of population growth and income and education levels.

Although the boundaries of district five have not changed since 1980, the population has more than doubled between the 1980 census and the 1990 census. According to the census bureau, the population in 1980 was 461 people, compared to 1,120 in 1990. For the most part, the large growth within this time period can be attributed to the natural growth that the area is experiencing. From 1970 (when the total number of people was 114) to 1980, the population more than quadrupled. Between the census of 1980 and 1990, however, the population only doubled. Thus, population growth in this area is in fact slowing. When considering the growth in population size, it is important to note that the numbers are small to begin with and therefore it is not difficult to initiate a relatively

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<sup>17</sup> Stanley L. Brue, and Campbell R McConnell, Economics: Principles, Problems, and Policies, 11th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Co., 1990) 725.

large increase. For example, the construction of a new twenty-story apartment building, with eight apartments per floor, and an average of three people in each apartment would add 480 new people to the district.

Once we know that the population is growing, it's possible to get a better perspective on how it's changing within by comparing more specific characteristics. For example, the income profile of the two censuses is drastically different. In 1980, the median income of unrelated individuals, 15 years or older, was 6,906 dollars, and the median family income was 9,531 dollars. The median income for an individual is only slightly above the 1987 poverty level of 5,778 dollars for an individual, and the median family income is well below the 1987 poverty level of 11,611 dollars for a family of four.<sup>18</sup> Even allowing for inflation, in 1980, district five was far from being a healthy residential area. In stark contrast are the income statistics from the 1990 census in which the median household income was 19,946 dollars, and the median family income was 45,903 dollars. Not only do these figures fall well above the poverty level, the median family income is far above the 1986 national average family income of 34,924 dollars.<sup>19</sup>

Another area of change in the census is the level of education obtained by the residents of district five. In 1980, of people 25 and older, only 59 percent of the population were high school graduates. In 1990, however, 84.2 percent were high school graduates and 47.9 percent had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. This increased

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<sup>18</sup> Brue, 734.

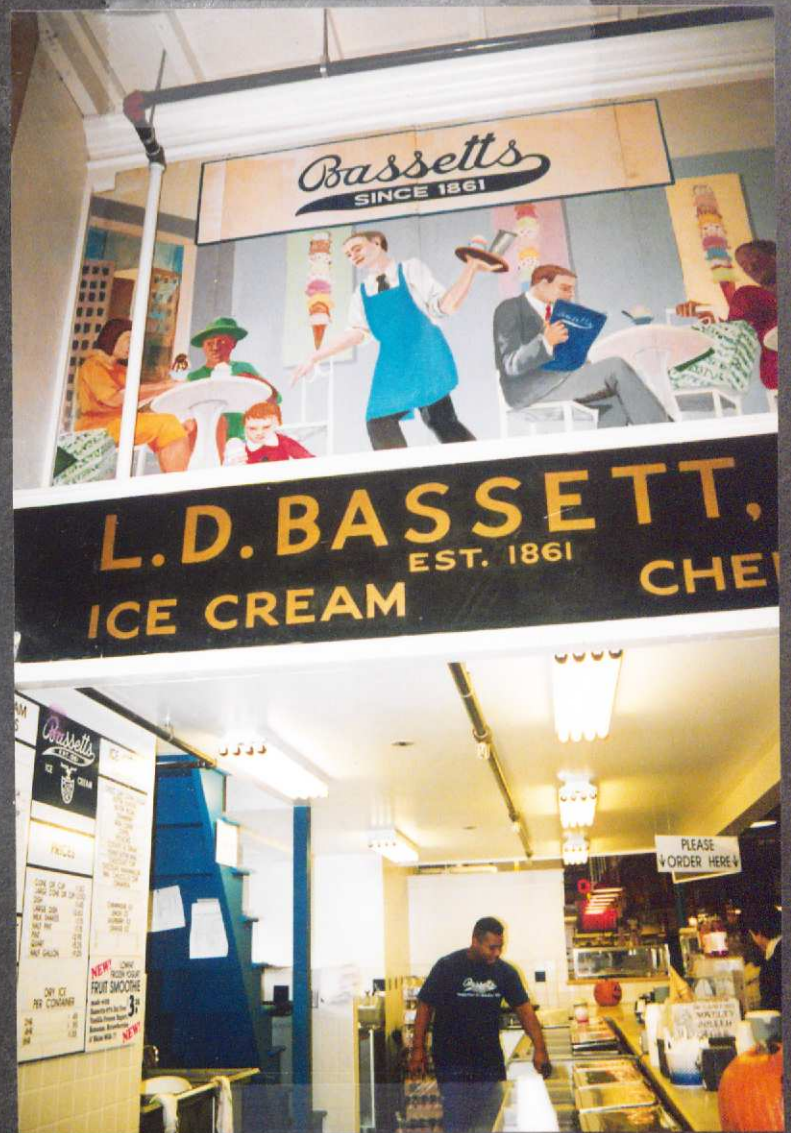
<sup>19</sup> Brue, 725.

level of education -- like the change in wealth -- over the past ten years reflects the city of Philadelphia's efforts to revitalize the central business district.

After much investigation into the "why or whither" of Bassett's ice cream stand, our group decided that although the surrounding neighborhood is rapidly and dramatically changing, the store, itself, should not. Bassett's is quintessential Philadelphia, and to change it in anyway would destroy the historical continuity which makes it a unique space. The entire Reading Terminal Market is undergoing a much needed renovation, and Bassett's will benefit from the repairs. The most immediate improvement cited by two of the Bassett's employees was that the roof above the store no longer leaks. Although such repairs within the terminal will make the Market more pleasant to shop and work in, the work which is being done in the area surrounding it, may detract from it's unique character. As previously stated, the construction of the new Convention Center and Marriott Hotel will bring new customers to Bassett's who threaten to drive off the regular customers who have been coming to Bassett's for decades. Although the Bassett's management has taken various steps (such as the Frequent Lickers Club) to keep their regular customers, such efforts may prove futile against the changing demographics of the downtown area. Thus, the future of Bassett's ice cream stand in it's socioeconomic, historical, and cultural context in the city of Philadelphia will be determined in the years to come.

A side view of Bassett's Ice Cream Shop. Above is the mural depiction of the shop. Below Eric, a worker at Bassett's Ice Cream, in the same shop now.

A full view of the entire Bassett's shop and counter.







Mr. Strange, the President of Bassett's Ice Cream and the fifth generation in his family to head Bassett's Ice Cream, prepares a cone for a customer.





The original marble counter top for Bassett's Ice Cream. This has been the counter top since the stores founding in the terminal in 1892.

During the lunch hour rush, Bassett's no longer allows its patrons with cones or cups to sit at the counter due to the long lines and congestion that accompanies the lunch hour rush.





The Bassett's Menu. Even though Mr. Strange prides himself in his ice cream's 17.7% buttermilk content, Bassett's has been forced to change with the times and now serves Low Fat Frozen Yogurt.

**Bassett's**  
EST. 1861

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The neighboring shops in the market. They include a clothing bizarre and a restaurant.





The Amish section constitutes one-fifth of the market. In this caption an Amish woman can be seen carrying the boxes to be returned to Amish country by bus at the end of the day.





The newly constructed Philadelphia Convention Center is located directly across from the market as part of a wider revitalization of the whole downtown area. The effect it will have on the market and its merchants is not yet known.

Another component of the revitalization campaign. The construction of the new Downtown Marriot Hotel.



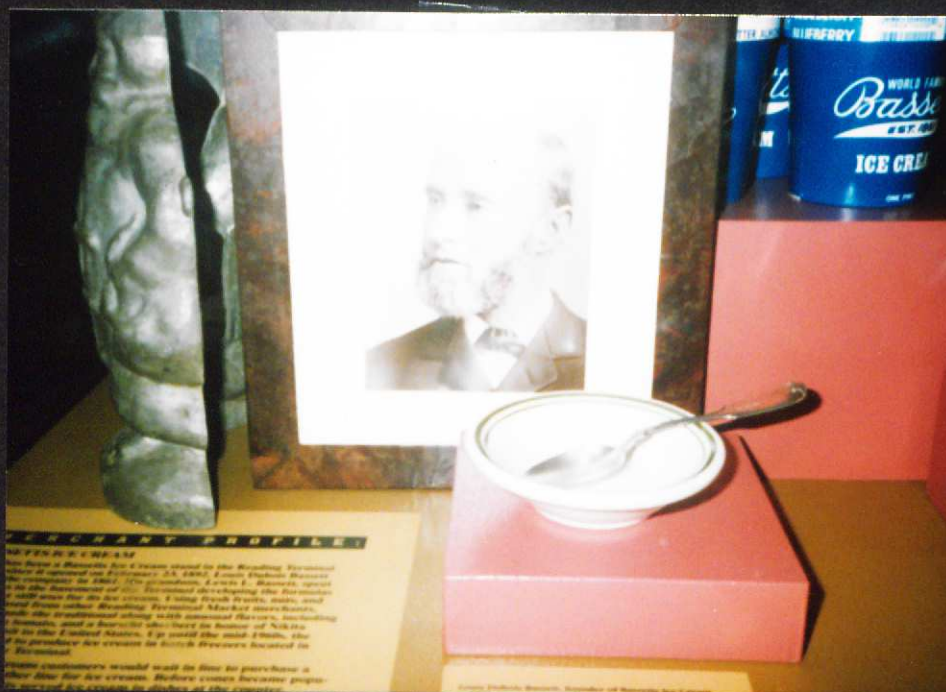


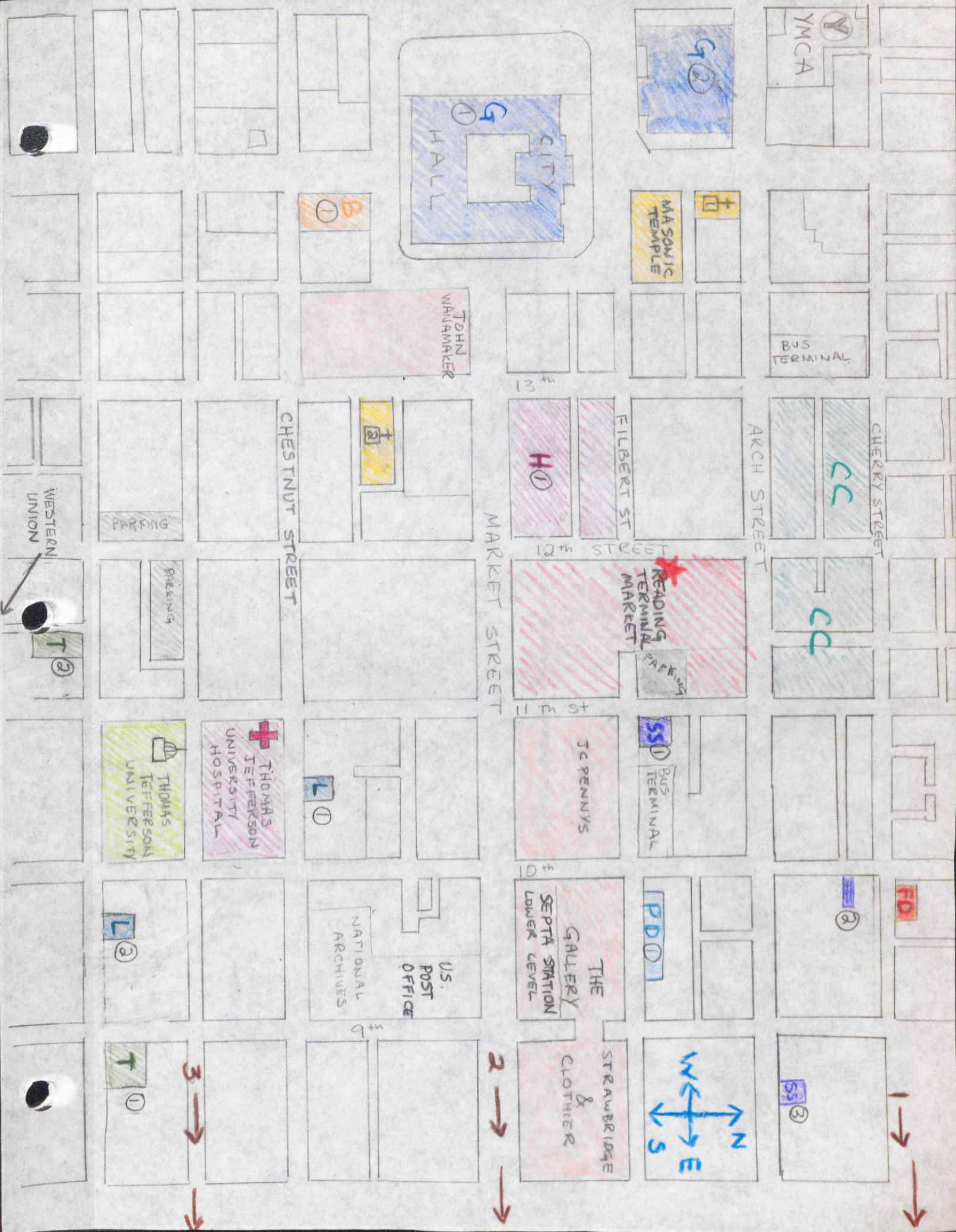
The street dividing the market from the new Philadelphia Convention Center. Above can be seen the overpass that upon completion will connect the Convention Center to the market.





Above is the Reading Terminal Market in the 1890's just after its construction had been completed. Below is a picture of the founder of Bassett's Ice Cream, Louis DuBois Bassett.









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KEY

★ = Bassett's Ice Cream

✚ = church

L = library

T = theater

✚ = hospital

FD = fire department

SS = social service

PD = police department

★ = headquarters

① = center city district

C = Cinema

B = bank

H = hotel

□ = school

⚙ = university, college

G = Government Agency

CC = convention center

S = Shopping Stores

M = museum

churches

✚ : Arch Street United Methodist Church

✚ : St. John's Roman Catholic Church

libraries

L① : Mercantile Branch Library

L② : Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped

theaters

T① : Walnut St. Theater

T② : Forrest Theater

Cinema (not on map) - 2nd street + Spruce Street  
 - 19th street + Chestnut Street

hotels H① : Marriot, still under construction, 1994 planned opening

social services SS① : Planned Parenthood  
 SS② : Chinese Cultural Center  
 SS③ : Asian American United Workshop

SCALE