by Darby Baham, New York Time Student Institute: 5/20/03

On a typical day in the 1930s, the French Market in New Orleans would be bouncing with locals trying to buy produce, seafood and other materials. It was a working outdoor market. Now, it is mainly a tourist attraction.

“We see more tourists around here than locals,” said Rochelle Reimonenq, a vendor of handmade decorative umbrellas. She said the tourists surprise her sometimes, though.

“One day two ladies came from out of town,” said Reimonenq, a native of New Orleans who has been a vendor in the market since 1991. “They were having a ball, partying in the middle of the day. They each bought an umbrella, and then came back with like 12 or 15 of their friends. They all bought umbrellas and cleared me out.”

But not everyone who shops at the French Market is looking around just to have a good time. Some people are looking for unique pieces of culture, said Stephano Velacka, an artist who uses recycled materials from French Quarter houses to make jewelry and other knickknacks.

“I try to give the tourists a chance to take a piece of New Orleans home,” said Velacka, who started painting when he was 9 years old and started working with mental when he was 16. “I engrave each person’s name on the items, so they feel like they get something from here that’s special.” Sometimes the tourists even take part in the process, he said.

“I’ve had people bring me pieces of cooper they found themselves and ask me to do something with it,” said Velacka, a Czech native who moved to New Orleans in 1971. “It usually takes about flour to six hours to make a regular brass brooch. A copper one would take somewhere between eight to 12 hours, and I make them right in the market.”

Still, he said most of the tourists really do not understand the history of the French Market and they visit only to buy trinkets and Mardi Gras paraphernalia. Velacks provides cards that briefly recount the French Market’s origins.

The French Market began as an open-air marketplace on Sept. 10, 1784. It was a place where area farmers would bring their produce and fresh meat to be sold to the locals of New Orleans.

A hurricane destroyed it in 1791, but the city government built a more permanent fixture in 1813. The first building was the Halle des Boucheries (the Butcher’s Market). Then, in 1823 the Halle des Legumes (Vegetable Market) was built about a block away.

In 1870, The Bazaar was built to fill the gap. The other buildings that make up the market, the Red Stores, The Cuisine Market, The Farmer’s Market and The Flea Market, were later put into place.

In 1930, however, the buildings were either destroyed or in bad shape again due to bad weather conditions. In an effort to fix the problem, the Project Works Administration decided to redesign and renovate the marketplace in 1937.

Today, tourists come from all over the world to visit the market. “We just got married in April and we decided to come to New Orleans for our honeymoon,” said Betty Humphries from Madison, Wis., as she sat reading with her husband. “We’ve had such a great time experiencing New Orleans and I love the old-age feel of the market.”

Not as many people are visiting these days, though, said Reimonenq. “The volume has slowed down buying wise,” she said. “Now it takes a good convention or something like Mardi Gras to really get a packed crowd.”

Velacka agreed that things have not been the same. “It’s been different since Sept. 11, especially,” he said. “It’s been a struggle since then. On an average day, you couldn’t walk through here without bumping into someone; it was so many people. Now, it’s practically no one here. We feel it. We definitely do. The allure is still apparent, however, said Velacka.

“It’s such a beautiful place and it reminds me of home,” he said. “It gives you the opportunity to do what you like to do and take a little piece of New Orleans away with you.”