

New York City Historical Overview

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define what New York City means
2. Review historical events (1800–1950)
3. Understand the boundaries and wards

DEFINING NEW YORK CITY

New York City's Evolution

New York City's long history and evolution from a settlement to the modern city affects research. There have been multiple governmental structures, increasing population, and rapid migration and immigration. All of which caused the City to change. This session covers New York City from 1800 to 1950, therefore post-American Revolution.

Step One: When

It is key to determine the period of research. New York City existed in a smaller form from 1664 to 1897. Then, in 1898, the modern five-borough City was formed and exists in this form to the present.

A key break point is 1898.

Step Two: Where, Combined with When

Locational references combined with the years of research help determine whether the research is for the old New York City (1800–1897) or for an area that became part of the modern New York City.

1989–present

Looking first at the modern/current New York City, it comprises five boroughs (municipal units) and five counties, which sometimes have different names.

The Bronx	Bronx County
Brooklyn	Kings County
Manhattan	New York County
Queens	Queens County
Staten Island	Richmond County

Pre-1898 New York City

New York City consisted of the island of Manhattan and several smaller islands surrounding it. During the period of 1800 to 1950, New York City's population expanded greatly from the concentration in the southern part of the City northward.

A 1797 map of the “city of New York” illustrates the area of population and its concentration downtown in what we now know as the Financial District

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Pre-1898 Brooklyn

The village, then town, then City of Brooklyn (incorporated in 1834) grew within Kings County. It annexed the City of Williamsburg(h) and the town of Bushwick in 1854. Other towns in Kings County were annexed into the City of Brooklyn until, in 1896, the City of Brooklyn became coterminous with Kings County—the City of Brooklyn and Kings County were the same area.

Pre-1898 Queens

Queens County contained six towns and Long Island City prior to 1898, namely Newtown, Flushing, Jamaica, North Hempstead, Hempstead, and Oyster Bay. The western three towns, plus Long Island City, became part of New York City in 1898. The three eastern towns did not join New York City and in 1899 became Nassau County. Some records generated by or in towns now in Nassau will be found in Queens County and New York City records. Queens County became smaller and is now the same area as the borough of Queens.

Note: Brooklyn and Queens are physically on Long Island; however, current usage of “Long Island” usually denotes current Nassau and Suffolk counties.

Pre-1898 Staten Island

Staten Island consisted of five towns prior to its consolidation into New York City. Those towns were dissolved upon incorporation into the borough of Staten Island, and the borough and Richmond County are coterminous.

Pre-1898 Bronx

Two areas in Westchester County were incorporated into New York City and New York County prior to the formation of the modern New York City. New York City annexed the towns of Morrisania, West Farms, and Kingsbridge in 1874. The Town of Westchester and the southern portions of Eastchester and Pelham were annexed in 1895. Those areas became part of New York County.

It was not until 1914 that New York County split off the area that was the Bronx into the new Bronx County.

Modern Five-borough City

The current City consists of five boroughs and five counties. Many records from the previous municipalities are held by the modern City.

Two Resources

New York Family History Research Guide and Gazetteer, revised edition 2017, available from the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society (NYG&B). See the County/Borough Guides and the timelines within each.

Harry Macy Jr, “Before the Five-borough City: The Old Cities, Towns and Villages That Came Together to Form ‘Greater New York,’”

<https://www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org/knowledgebase/five-borough-city-old-cities-towns-and-villages-came-together-form-greater-new-york>

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HISTORICAL EVENTS (1800—1950)

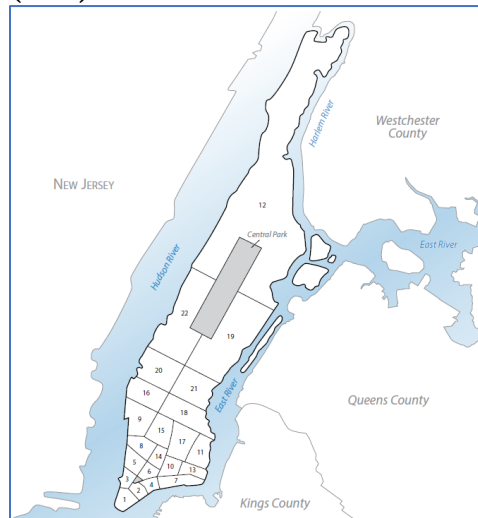
1798	State capital is moved to Albany
1800	City directory ~400 pages
1811	City commissioners laid out the “grid” from Houston Street to the north end of the Island
1819	<i>Steerage Act</i> resulting in 1820– passenger lists
1823	No further burials in lower Manhattan
1828	Blackwells Island acquired by New York City
1838	Green-Wood Cemetery established <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1851 no new cemeteries in New York County • Most cemeteries south of 86th St. closed
1840s	Wave of immigration
1850	City directory, <1,200 pages
1855	First surviving State census
1855	New York State opens Castle Garden immigration station
1869	City Cemetery established on Hart Island
1874	New York City and County annexed areas of Westchester County
1883	Brooklyn Bridge completed
1890	Immigration transferred to federal government (1892 Ellis Island opened)
1895	City and County annexed town of Westchester and southern part of Eastchester and Pelham
1898	Modern New York City formed
1900	City directory, <3,300 pages
1925	Last New York State census

New York City Vital Records Timeline	
1795	First epidemic death lists
1810s	More comprehensive burial registers
1829	Some marriages recorded
1847	Towns that later become New York City begin recording birth and death registers
1862	Brooklyn death certificates begin
1866	New York City certificates for birth, marriage, and death
1880s	Vital records for all areas that become New York City

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BOUNDARIES AND WARDS

Boundary of New York City (1853)



Map Resources

New York Family History Research Guide and Gazetteer, revised edition 2017, available from the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society (NYG&B). See the County/Borough Guides.

New York Public Library Digital Collections, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/>

David Rumsey Map Collection, <https://www.davidrumsey.com/>

Library of Congress, <https://loc.gov/collections/>

Wards

In 1791 the seven old wards were dissolved and seven new wards created, with different boundaries and designated by numbers. Between 1791 and 1853 the number of wards increased to 22. When the future Bronx was annexed it was divided into wards 23 and 24.

In the 19th century New York City politics was based on the wards, and most city dwellers were very conscious of the ward in which they resided, especially if they lived below 14th Street, where 16 of the 22 wards were located. The wards became increasingly associated with fraud and were stripped of political significance by the end of the 19th century. They were abolished in 1936.

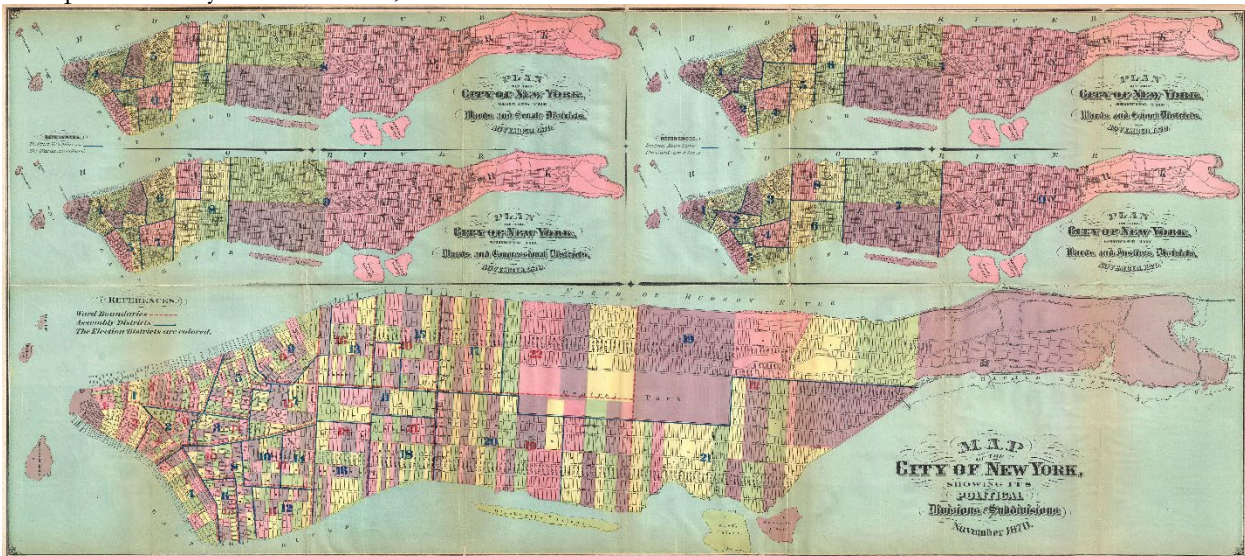
Wards were used in census designations through 1870. They were also used for other financial and political purposes. Records may be organized by ward.

See Manhattan/New York County Guide for the tables created by Harry Macy Jr. with ward numbers, the ward boundaries, when they were created or divided, and the neighborhoods (old and current).

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Ward	Boundaries When Created or Divided	Neighborhoods, <i>Old</i> and Current
1	1791 West side, south of <i>Little Queen</i> (Cedar) Street and west from Nassau, Broad, and <i>Dock</i> Streets and <i>Exchange Market</i> to Hudson River, including the small islands in the Bay	(1803) <i>New Amsterdam</i> , Financial District, Battery, and Governors, Liberty, and Ellis Islands
	1803 Wards 1 and 2 merged as new Ward 1, all Manhattan south of Thames and Pine Streets	
	1817 All Manhattan south of Liberty Street and Maiden Lane	

“Map of the City of New York,” 1870.¹



¹ <http://www.geographicus.com/mm5/cartographers/hardy.txt> - This file was provided to Wikimedia Commons by Geographicus Rare Antique Maps, a specialist dealer in rare maps and other cartography of the 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, as part of a cooperation project., Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=14691902>