

A Century of Aerial Photography

NEW YORK

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PRESTEL

Munich · London · New York

Contents



7

INTRODUCTION

16

BEFORE AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHY

1630 to 1899

44

THE EARLY DECADES

1900 to 1949

90

THE MODERN ERA

1950 to 1999

146

THE PRESENT

2000 to Today

238 • 239

BIOGRAPHY AND PHOTO CREDITS





INTRODUCTION

All great cities attract the artist, the cartographer, and—more recently—the photographer. The successive practitioners of these crafts have variously captured the growth of cities over time. In earlier centuries, city walls, churches, and aristocratic palaces were strongly featured; they represented the security, the faith, and the strength of the people within the walls. Until the Middle Ages the task of recording was not too difficult; cities were small and developed only slowly; they had often grown in a valley or at a river crossing.

A valley location allowed for overviews from higher ground—and often a whole city could be captured in a single sketch. Castle towers and church domes or spires broke the upper horizon, and often the tiny figures of merchants or citizens could be perceived on the lower margin.

By the 1500s to 1600s, many cities had become too large for this type of overview treatment. Maps began to come in, depicting the entire extent of a city—far more than the eye could take in from any one vantage point. Gone were the artistic embellishments: perhaps gods breathing out winds or angels with trumpets overhead; perhaps savage animals or monsters patrolling the foreground; or perhaps orchards bearing bountiful fruit. Instead, inset panels might name numbered landmarks, particularly churches, colleges, or other major public buildings and streets.

At some time between the 1850s and 1900 or so, many capital cities and manufacturing cities had become too large for this convenient treatment; if maps were to have readable type, the sheets became too large for convenient use. One answer was sectional maps, with the viewer using only what was needed; another was to develop specialized maps providing only selected information: hence maps of churches, museums, theaters, colleges, and so on.

The modern age, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, has intensified all the problems of “capturing” cities visually, but has also provided a superb new tool for ensuring capture. Aerial photography, which came in fitfully in the 1870s, soon became a very flexible tool that, in the hands of creative practitioners, has given rise to a distinguished and ever-growing body of work.

New York City—and Manhattan in particular—was in many ways an ideal subject for aerial photographers. The central city is both remarkably compact and also includes a remarkable variety of elements, facts not lost on early navigators. Once through the Narrows—the gateway to the Lower Bay—the southern tip of Manhattan Island stands at the head of the Upper Bay. Manhattan was in fact a perfect site upon which to found a colony, as the Dutch did in 1624. Fortunately, the narrow shape of Manhattan and the fact that it was an island of only moderate size (13.4 miles in length; 2.2 miles in breadth) greatly helped early artists and cartographers—and from the twentieth century on, this was an advantage to aerial photographers.

WORKING SPIRES

Though they may appear decorative, adding distinction to their structures, spires also serve electronic, communications, and related functions. In the case of the Empire State Building, initial plans called for a dirigible mooring station, soon abandoned as unmanageable—and potentially dangerous.

Early depictions of Manhattan clearly show a number of vital factors, among them fine access by water, compactness and defensibility, and a substantial tract of land to the northeast that would allow for future expansion. In terms of chronology, by the 1600s visual depictions and maps had left behind fanciful depictions and imaginative conceptions. Cartography had moved into the era of the accurate and the exact, where measurement had superseded estimation. One factor in this transition was that colonization meant investment—and investors were not prepared to commit their funds to a *terra incognita*, or to any unproven promise of gold in the mountains... Furs and skins were key items of trade—and if animal life was abundant, this could be confirmed as being so. Cartography shed its artistic patrimony and embraced its scientific future.

But the great revolution came about in the 1870s with the beginnings of aerial photography. The earliest examples (including shots of Boston at that time) were naturally not very impressive. Film stock quality could not be guaranteed, and many potential scenes were partly masked by the smoke of innumerable coal-burning fires—with manufacturing plants making a major contribution—and by the vibrations that endlessly disturbed smooth flight in early propeller-driven aircraft.

New York can be considered an ideal subject for photography from the air. The Narrows and the Upper and Lower Bays form a majestic foreground while the compactness of Lower Manhattan (the site of the Dutch and subsequent British colony) allows capture of both the old curvilinear street patterns and, to the north, the rectangular grid (begun in 1811) of parallel avenues extending northward and parallel streets running east and west, with Fifth Avenue (New York's central spine) marking the division between east and west. Many major cities, with London, Paris, Vienna, and Moscow notable among them, straddle a river. New York differs absolutely in that Manhattan Island is flanked on both sides by rivers, with a third river, the Harlem River, separating Manhattan's northern tip from the South Bronx. Given the comparative narrowness of Manhattan (2.2 miles at its broadest), many aerial photographs "frame" the island, bordered by the Hudson and East Rivers. From a greater height, the whole of Manhattan can be captured, with the Upper Bay to the south and the Harlem River to the north both helping frame the island.

The great interest that the continuing photography of New York from the air provides is the variety of scenes simultaneously captured, and the rapid change over time. Photographs in the late nineteenth century capture both the Brooklyn Bridge and the Statue of Liberty, and those up until the mid-twentieth century confirm the fact that New York was not only a great business city but also a thriving port, with sail-bearing and steam-driven ships crowding the Hudson and East River piers. Every viewer of photographs of New York becomes aware of how powerfully development rolled north, with the Chrysler Building opening in 1930, the Empire State Building in 1931, and Rockefeller Center throughout the 1930s. These were gigantic and near-simultaneous footprints, taking development far north of Lower Manhattan and, in the case of Rockefeller Center, deep into Midtown. Given that the Great Depression began in 1929, these buildings represented a supreme gesture of confidence in the future of the economy and of New York City.

Since that time, the construction of new high-rise towers appears to have been Manhattan's key enterprise. As this volume's images show, there has been a proliferation of building projects, continuing with ever-taller towers up until the present time. But these towers are not the only potent image of New York. The city's bridges are remarkable for their engineering boldness and their sophistication of design; they confirm that New York is a great business center, drawing on 1.5 million workers living beyond its rivers. But there is a far quieter New York, perhaps best exemplified by the 840-acre Central Park, though generously supplemented by Union Square, Chelsea Piers, Washington Square Park, and other places of recreation. Here the streets seem far away and the hum of activity is far less pronounced.

If the Empire State Building's 102nd-floor observation deck offers great urban views, then Central Park offers unrivaled green tranquility in which to recollect them. New York certainly has it all...

10 • 11 | WATERFRONT SCENES |

One World Trade Center, the Brooklyn Bridge, and the Manhattan Bridge (curiously shadowed in blue in the water) do much to define Lower Manhattan. Noteworthy is the intensive urbanization of Brooklyn and the New Jersey shorelines, both of which show much

evidence of continuing maritime activity. The significant clustering of steel-and-glass towers in the Financial District forms a sharp contrast with low-rise Brooklyn and (to the right) Manhattan's Lower East Side.

12 • 13 | LACEWORK OF LIGHT |

In this image, the avenues are running from west to east, with Madison Square Garden at 7th Avenue and 33rd Street and, above it, the Empire State Building at Fifth Avenue and 34th Street. Moving left (northward), the huge cluster of high-rise buildings north of

34th Street becomes visible. Upper left is the Citigroup Center with its familiar sloping roof. Numbered avenues and streets make the task of finding destinations in New York much easier than anomalous street names.

14 • 15 | BIRD'S-EYE VIEW |

A seldom-seen view of Central Park showing the American Museum of Natural History outside the park, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art inside it. Game courts of various types show up as light brown, and the park's dense tree cover is very obvious. The north is to the

left side, where Harlem Meer dominates the greensward. At the top of the image is the East River, the Queensboro Bridge, and Roosevelt Island; at the bottom is evidence of the Hudson River's bustling maritime activity.





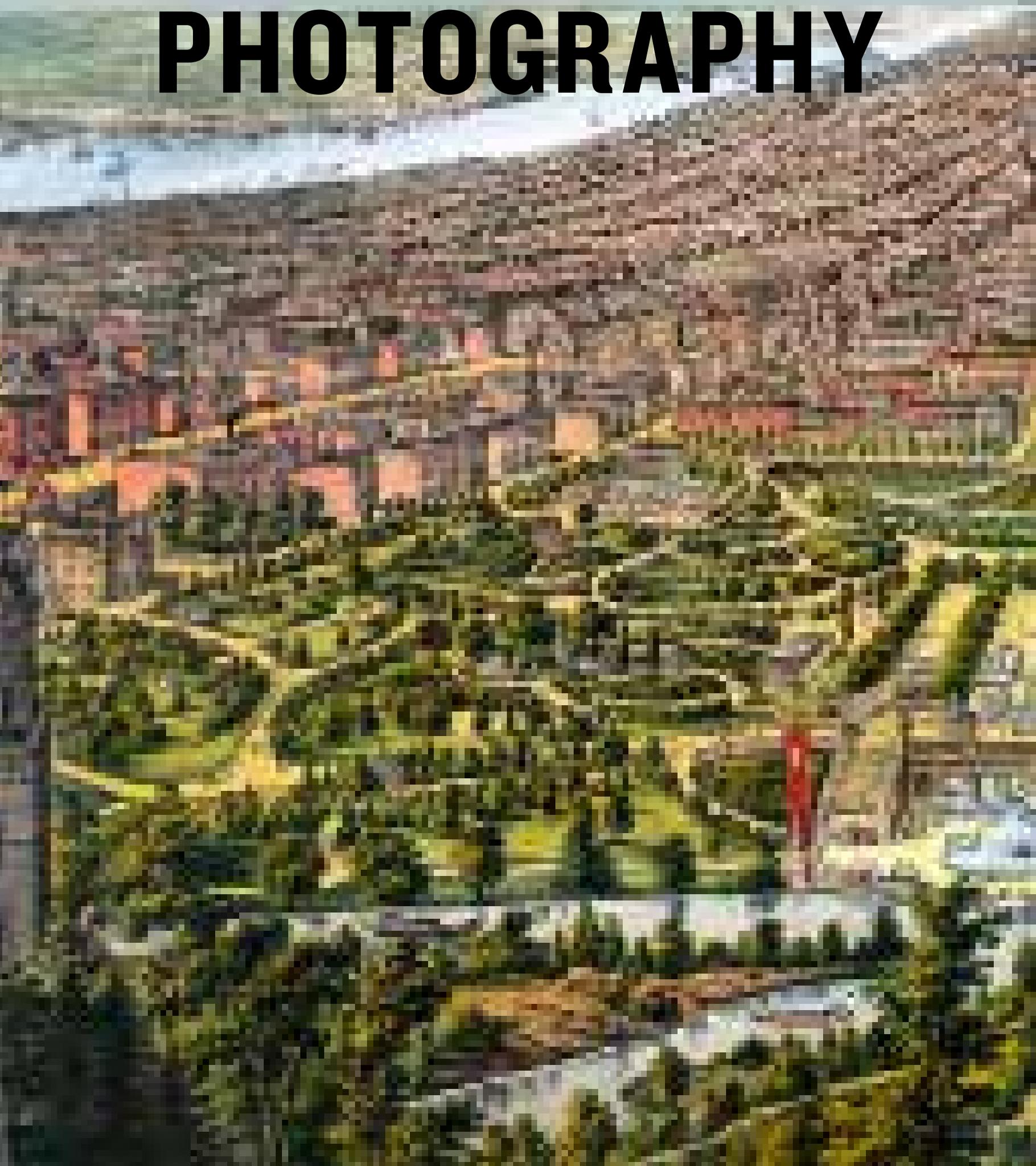








BEFORE AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHY





1630–1899

IMAGES OF NEW YORK FROM THE 1630s TO 1899

Viewed from above, the most striking feature about New York—or Manhattan as it can equally well be called—was its superb physical basis for steady and cohesive development. From a minute thumbtack of a settlement on its southern tip, urban development would naturally advance northward, swallowing outlying settlements, until reaching the island’s northern tip. To any progressive thinker, New York’s growth into a densely populated major city was eminently predictable.

Access and communications were first class. The bay that connects Manhattan to the Atlantic has a narrow and defensible mouth; the rivers that bound the island are easily navigable, with the Hudson serving as a huge artery to the northern hinterlands. Urban growth and development merely had to roll north over a terrain that offered no insuperable natural barriers.

Manhattan, an island some 13.4 miles long with a width ranging from 0.8 miles to 2.3 miles, encompassing an area of some 22.7 square miles, is composed largely of mica schist, an ideal foundation for manmade structures. The city commissioners' imposition of the grid plan in 1811, which called for easily traveled parallel avenues and cross streets for New York above 14th Street, ensured the orderly urban growth of the northern nine-tenths of the landmass. Farms and occasional clusters of homes and villages would eventually be swallowed up as New York expanded northward. The filling in of creeks, inlets, and small bays produced a very serviceable waterfront, home to an immense maritime trade. The engineering technologies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries made possible the bridges that linked a mighty metropolis to its fast-developing neighboring territories, and Manhattan, which became ever richer through trade and manufacturing, expanded relentlessly northward, creating one of the world's most iconic cities. However, for the first two centuries or so the pictorial record is modest, a complete contrast to the overwhelming photographic record of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

What does the pictorial—and later the photographic—record tell us? The first image of what is today's New York dates back to circa 1628, and depicts a small settlement at the southern tip of today's Manhattan. It was founded in 1624 by the Dutch West India Company, which was bent on anchoring its claims to a huge stretch of North America's shore and hinterlands. The company landed some 110 persons, some with wives and children, and named the settlement New Amsterdam, after the Netherlands' great port city. A year previously, the company had landed a group of settlers on a small island a half-mile to the south, an island that would later be called Governors Island, as it was reserved for use by the British royal governors. The aim in both locations was to create permanent and expanding trading posts, with beaver and other animal skins being a major commodity.

Though the Dutch were the first Europeans to settle on Manhattan—as the Native Americans called the island—they were not the first to see it. In April 1524, Giovanni da Verrazano looked out on New York’s Lower Bay (the sea approach to Manhattan); in 1526, Estêvão Gomes of Portugal, employed by Spain, reached today’s Hudson River; and in 1609, Henry Hudson of England sailed up the river now named for him. All noted the promise of the lands they saw, and their reports led Europe’s maritime nations into a struggle for ownership and trade in the New York region.

From its birth, New Amsterdam was prepared for attack, as Britain, a rival power, had expansionist maritime aims. The fledgling New Amsterdam’s largest building was the fortress at the southern tip guarding its cluster of homes, storehouses, windmill, and cargo ships against British or French attack, and a palisade to the north (Wall Street marks the line) as a defense against Native American marauders. The local Lenape tribe became less of a threat with Peter Minuit’s purchase of Manhattan from them for trade goods worth 60 guilders, often valued as \$24. The new settlement flourished, and in 1653, Governor Peter Stuyvesant incorporated New Amsterdam, though not yet the size of a town, as a city.

New Amsterdam was supposed to do more than fend for itself (and the windmill and the garden plots tell us something about early food sources); it was also required to enrich the mother city, “Old” Amsterdam, and the constant presence of ships in early representations of New Amsterdam bear witness to its involvement in trade, with the aforementioned animal skins being particularly prized.

A map of 1664 shows a very compact “city,” dominated by its fort but with a lofty church and houses of substantial size. There was an expanding array of well-laid-out streets and gardens filling the area within the palisade, but with indications of enclosed farmlands beyond it. But any sense of quiet security was soon shattered. In that same year of 1664, the British were able to seize the settlement, the island, and its vast hinterlands, all to be renamed New York, as King Charles II’s brother, James, the duke of York, had led the campaign. Within Europe and in the East Indies, the Netherlands and Great Britain had long been intermittently at war, each seeking to dominate the seas and secure the lion’s share of trade. New York was indeed a valuable commercial prize.

The Dutch did not take the loss of New Amsterdam lightly, and with a masterful seaborne invasion regained possession in 1673, only to relinquish it in 1674, accepting a British-held spice island in the Dutch East Indies in its place. Under British rule, New York—with a population of over one thousand—grew



1630

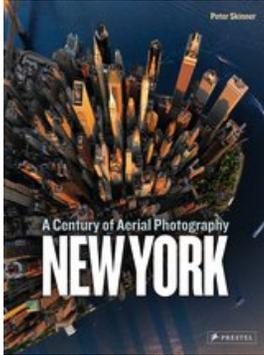
1899

steadily throughout the next century, expanding north beyond the natural “frontier” of today’s Canal Street, which ran east-west, following a low-lying watercourse. During the next century, from the 1670s to the 1770s, New York steadily expanded and became an ever-busier port, growing in wealth and trade. But this peaceful evolution was soon to be interrupted, with the American Revolution pitting the colony of New York against the Motherland. A near decade of hostilities put an end to any possibility of a continuing untroubled existence.

Contention mounted in the early 1770s, with the English settlers in New York and North America protesting against the Crown’s requirement to restrict their trade to supplying the mother country and to import needed goods only from her. The colonists also had to pay taxes to support defense and administration costs; as they could not send an elected representative of their own to Parliament, they saw no hope for securing remedies for any of their grievances. “No taxation without representation” became the colonists’ rallying cry. They supported this with action, and made the rebellious decision to stop paying certain taxes. Negotiations between the Crown and the colonists broke down, and in 1776 the colonists declared their independence. Britain responded with military movements and occupied New York, which, given its 25,000 or so inhabitants, was a key strategic location. Within days of the British occupation of New York, in September 1776, a disastrous fire broke out, destroying some five hundred houses (many were now substantial, well-built homes with gardens and access to the water) and damaging about a third of the city, mainly on the western side. Military operations in the ensuing years caused much additional damage to both buildings and crops in the fields adjoining the city. Then, in November 1783, with British defeats in North America mounting, the war wound down, and George Washington led the victorious “Americans” into the city.

Historic events now happened in rapid sequence. For the three years from 1785 to 1788, New York served as the capital of the newly emerging nation, and thereafter, in 1789, as capital of the formally constituted United States, until 1791, when the largely unbuilt but envisioned Washington, in the newly created district of Columbia, was designated as the nation’s capital. Unfettered from the burden of being a capital city, New York continued to grow as a great trade entrepôt, with a constantly burgeoning number of immigrants, for a total population of 90,000. Trade, manufacturing, agriculture, and the population’s housing and transportation needs led to a subtle physical reshaping of New York’s profile, with landfills smoothing out the shore line and with streams and riverlets being paved over and building projects advanced.

UNVERKÄUFLICHE LESEPROBE



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