THE HISTORY OF THE GEOGRAPHY OF NEW YORK CITY
Stephen P. Morse (steve@stevemorse.org)
Joel D. Weintraub (censusfiles@cox.net)

Introduction: New York City has undergone numerous changes in its geographical boundaries. An understanding of these boundaries is important in order to know which archive to search in when looking for vital records. This paper discusses the changes to New York City's geography over the years and describes the difference between New York City and the City of New York.

Present-day New York: Let's start by looking at the present geography of New York. New York City and the City of New York are now synonymous terms and consist of the five boroughs, namely Manhattan (New York County), Brooklyn (Kings County), Queens (Queens County), the Bronx (Bronx County), and Staten Island (Richmond County). Note that each borough is a county but possibly with a different name. This was not always the case. Note that everywhere else in the country, a county contains one or more cities. In New York, there are five counties within one city.

The Boroughs of Manhattan (less the Marble Hill section discussed later) and Staten Island are on their own islands, while Brooklyn and Queens are part of a larger island known as Long Island. By common usage, the term "Long Island" refers to the parts of the island that are outside the city boundaries, namely Nassau County and Suffolk County. But this is a misnomer, since Nassau and Suffolk by themselves do not constitute an island. The Bronx is not an island but is connected to the North American mainland and abuts Westchester County.

As we will see, New York City originally referred to Manhattan Island only. To this day, common usage of the term "The City" refers to just Manhattan, although that too is a misnomer. Many maps with the title of "New York City" turn out to be primarily maps of Manhattan.

The French, the Dutch, and the British: Here are the dates of some key events in the early history of New York City.

1524   Giovanni da Verrazzano, sailing for France, discovers New York Harbor. He names it New Angoulême.
1609   Henry Hudson, sailing for Holland, rediscovers New York Harbor and is given the credit for its discovery. He continues sailing up to Albany.
1624   First European settlers arrive in the region and name it New Amsterdam.
1626   Governor Peter Minuit purchases Manhattan Island from the Indians for $24 worth of trinkets, or so it is alleged.
1653   First city charter is granted.
1664   Governor Peter Stuyvesant surrenders to the British Duke of York. New Amsterdam is renamed New York.
1763   Cornelis Evertsen recaptures New York for the Dutch and renames it New Orange. But the Dutch didn't want it back, and he is forced to return it (oops).

Some of these dates are reflected in the city's seal. The original seal of 1686 didn't have a date. The revised seal of 1915 gives the date of 1664, which is the year that the city was first called

New York. But there was some concern among New Yorkers that Boston was claiming an earlier date of 1630. So in 1977 the City Council revised the seal to display the date of 1625. Unfortunately 1625 doesn't have great significance in the history of the city. But it's close enough to 1624, which is the year that the city received the name of New Amsterdam.

Origins of the Counties: Richmond County (Staten Island), New York County (Manhattan), Kings County (Brooklyn), and Queens County were created in 1683. Queens County then included what is today Nassau County. The land area of what is the Bronx today was part of Westchester County.

The area of New York County (and, synonymously, New York City) remained static until 1874. In that year New York County expanded as the land west of the Bronx River (Kingsbridge, West Farms, and Morrisania) was annexed from Westchester County. This is the western part of what is today the Bronx. If you were looking for a person in the New York State Census of 1875, and they lived in the western part of the Bronx, you would find them on New York County census forms.

In 1894 the remainder of what is now the Bronx was annexed from Westchester County. And in 1915 the Bronx was removed from New York County and made into a county of its own.

County changes were occurring in the eastern part of the city as well. In 1899 the eastern portion of Queens County broke away and formed Nassau County.

The Changing Geography of Brooklyn: The area that is today Kings County began as six towns back in the 1600s. These towns and the year in which each was founded are:

1645	Town of Gravesend
1646	Town of Brooklyn (originally Breuckelen)
1647	Town of Flatlands (originally New Amersfoort)
1652	Town of Flatbush, western part (originally Midwout)
1657	Town of New Utrecht
1661	Town of Bushwick (originally Boswijck)
1677	Town of Flatbush, eastern part (originally New Lotts of Midwout)

And in 1683 Kings County was created and it consisted of these six towns. The changing geography of Kings County then continues as follows:

1816	Village of Brooklyn is incorporated
1827	Village of Williamsburgh (with an "h") is incorporated
1834	Village of Brooklyn + Town of Brooklyn => City of Brooklyn
1840	Village of Williamsburgh => Town of Williamsburgh
1851	Town of Williamsburgh => City of Williamsburgh
1852	Eastern Flatbush => Town of New Lots
1854	City of Brooklyn annexes City of Williamsburg (dropping the h) and Town of Bushwick
1886	City of Brooklyn annexes Town of New Lots
1894	City of Brooklyn annexes Towns of Flatbush, Gravesend, and New Utrecht

1896   City of Brooklyn annexes Town of Flatlands

The unification of Brooklyn is now complete but it will be short-lived.

The Changing Geography of Queens: The area that is today Queens County began as five towns back in the 1600s. These towns and the year in which each was founded are:

        1644   Town of Hempstead
        1645   Town of Flushing (originally Vlishing)
        1652   Town of Newton (today Elmhurst)
        1656   Town of Jamaica
        1667   Town of Oyster Bay

And in 1683 Queens County was created and it consisted of these five towns. The changing geography of Queens County then continues as follows:

        1784   Town of North Hempstead splits off from Hempstead
        1870   Town of Long Island City splits off from Newton
        1896   Newton changes its name to Elmhurst
        1898   Borough of Queens created, western part of county only

The Referendum: Discussions about consolidating New York City with its surrounding areas started in earnest in the late 1860s. A nonbinding referendum was put before the voters in 1894.

The referendum showed that there was a general agreement to go forward with the merger. Since towns in Westchester County that were in the eastern part of the Bronx were in favor of it, New York County in 1895 annexed the eastern part of the Bronx from Westchester County. Thus New York County and therefore New York City then encompassed Manhattan and all of what is today the Bronx.

The Consolidation: In 1897 New York State Governor Black signed the charter of *the City of New York* (its official name) which would consist of the counties of Richmond, Kings (Brooklyn), New York (including the Bronx), and the western part of Queens County (what is today all of Queens County). The eastern Queens towns of Hempstead, North Hempstead, and Oyster Bay were excluded. The new City of New York started on January 1, 1898. The airmail stamp, issued in 1948, commemorated the Golden Anniversary of the City of New York.

Here Come the Boroughs: Along with the consolidation, the five boroughs were established. They were (and still are) the Boroughs of the Bronx, Manhattan, Richmond, Brooklyn, and Queens. Boroughs are a unique part of the city. Each elects its own President, although their political powers are limited. The political power is in the hands of the mayor of New York City and the City Council.

So the term "City of New York" came into being in 1898 and consisted of the five boroughs. At that point the term "New York City," which previously referred to New York County, should

have ceased to exist. But "New York City" continued to be used with some ambiguous meanings through the years. Today the two terms are synonymous.

Although the city consisted of the five boroughs, it comprised only four counties. Bronx was not yet a county, and the Borough of the Bronx was part of New York County. Another peculiarity was that the Borough of Queens was not coterminous with Queens County; instead it was only the western part of the county. The eastern part of Queens County was not in the Borough of Queens and not part of the new city. And the Borough of Richmond posed yet another problem. Although the official name was the Borough of Richmond, New Yorkers referred to it as the Borough of Staten Island. These three issues were cleared up by the following events.

1899   Excluded areas of eastern Queens County seceded and formed Nassau County
1915   Bronx County was formed, resulting in five counties coterminous with the five boroughs
1977   Borough of Richmond is renamed to the Borough of Staten Island

The Marble Hill Anomaly: Marble Hill, with a Bronx zip code of 10463, is the exception that proves the rule about historical knowledge leading to correct genealogical resources. This original northeast tip of Manhattan Island was once separated from the mainland of the Bronx, to its north, by Spuyten Duyvil Creek. The Harlem Ship Canal was completed in 1895, and it created a waterway on the south side of Marble Hill. This left Marble Hill surrounded by water: the canal on the south and the original northern loop of the creek along the remaining edges.

In 1914 the creek was filled in so that Marble Hill became part of the mainland of the Bronx and was no longer on Manhattan Island.

Marble Hill, however, remained in Manhattan Borough and New York County. In 1939 Bronx Borough President Lyons tried to annex Marble Hill. Lyons even went there as a publicity stunt and raised the flag of the Borough of Bronx over it, declaring that community as a part of Bronx Borough. Mayor La Guardia then recommended that Marble Hill be placed in the Bronx but angry residents opposed the plan. Governor Lehman sided with the residents and that ended the takeover attempt.

In 1983 a court ruled that Marble Hill was in Manhattan Borough and in Bronx County! That paradox was quickly addressed by the New York State legislature, which in 1984 put the area firmly back within New York County and the Borough of Manhattan.

Full paper is available at https://stevemorse.org/census/location2.htm.