LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION, IN NEW YORK CITY (OR IS IT THE CITY OF NEW YORK?) A History of the Geography of New York City

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A version of this article, without the graphics, appeared in Dorot Volume 36-1, Fall 2014

Introduction: In order to find genealogical records, we often need to have an accurate location for the underlying event. Figuring out which archive or collection contains a record often depends on knowing that information. New York City is an example where lack of knowledge of City history can lead to searches in the wrong archive. This essay discusses the history of New York City <u>and</u> the City of New York. I will show that these two city names haven't always been equivalent, as well as show other geographical situations that influence family history research in the City.

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 boroughs of Manhattan (New York County), Brooklyn (Kings County), Queens, the Bronx, and Staten Island (Richmond County). 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. And 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 Dutch and the British: Now for a historical perspective. The Dutch in 1625 founded New Amsterdam on Manhattan Island. England took over the area in 1664 and renamed it New York after the Duke of



York. From those beginnings, New York City has flourished. The City seal reflects this history. Initially it showed a 1664 date, but the City Council in 1977 changed the year to 1625. The

official seal is used today to represent the entire city, perhaps leading people to assume the City of New York was formed in 1625; it wasn't.

The Origin of Counties: The Counties of Richmond, New York (Manhattan), Kings (Brooklyn), and Queens were created in 1683. Queens County then included what is today Nassau. The land area of what is the Bronx today was part of Westchester County. An 1829 map of the area is shown on the right.



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 up records of someone 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. If you were searching for people in the New York City "Police Census" of 1890, you would have to know the area covered was only Manhattan and west Bronx.

The Changing Geography of Brooklyn: The area that is today Kings County started out 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 Midwoot)

And in 1683 Kings County was created to encompass the six towns. But the changing geography of the county doesn't end there. In 1816 a portion of the Town of Brooklyn was incorporated and became the Village of Brooklyn, and in 1834 the Town of Brooklyn and the Village of Brooklyn were combined to become the City of Brooklyn. This is shown in the map below, reprinted from Nancy Lutz's bklyn-genealogy website (<u>http://bklyn-genealogy-info.stevemorse.org/Image/5dutchtowns.jpg</u>).

Brooklyn wasn't the only city in Kings County. In 1827, a portion of the Town of Bushwick was incorporated and became the Village of Williamsburgh (with an 'h'). In 1840 it became the Town of Williamsburgh (and was no longer part of the Town of Bushwick), and in 1851 it became the City of Williamsburgh. But the City of Williamsburgh existed for only three years and in 1854 it, along with the Town of Bushwick, was subsumed into the City of Brooklyn.



Meanwhile the eastern section of the Town of Flatbush seceded and became the separate Town of New Lots in 1852. Then in 1886, the Town of New Lots was annexed by the City of Brooklyn. The City of Brooklyn was now on the rise, and in 1894 it annexed the Towns of Flatbush, Gravesend, and New Utrecht. And in 1896 the unification of Brooklyn was complete when the Town of Flatlands was annexed. But this unified City of Brooklyn would be short lived.

For comparison purposes, the following map shows the boundaries of the original six towns overlaid on a contemporary neighborhood map of Brooklyn. The boundaries of the six towns are approximate. And there is no standard for the contemporary neighborhood names or their boundaries. So this comparative map should be taken with a grain of salt.



derived from image at http://i.imgur.com/NqufQJT.gif

The Referendum: Discussions about consolidating New York City with its surrounding areas started in earnest in the late 1860s. Many were opposed to the idea. The 1877 figure to the right from Puck Magazine illustrates this point. Mr. New York City is offering a marriage proposal to Miss Brooklyn who seems interested, but the Brooklyn politicians and newspaper editors are very much against it.

A non-binding referendum in November



1894 of the possible areas for a new city (unofficially called "Greater New York") was put before the affected voters. In Westchester County the referendum was defeated in the town of Westchester (by one vote) and the Cities of Mount Vernon and Yonkers. Flushing in Queens County voted no, while the rest of what is Queens County today voted yes. New York County (then Manhattan and west Bronx) voted yes, as did Richmond County and the towns of Pelham and Eastchester, and the village of Wakefield in Westchester County.

The City of Brooklyn, which by that time had annexed most of the smaller cities within Kings County, had to make an interesting decision in this referendum. It was the 4th largest city in the United States in 1890 behind New York City, Chicago, and Philadelphia. Would they give up their identity? But Brooklyn was heavily in debt and bankruptcy was loaming. Brooklyn also had limited access to water of any quality. New York City on the other hand had plenty of good water. By only 277 votes out of 129,211 ballots, Brooklyn supported the consolidation.

Given the general agreement to go forward with the merger, New York County in 1895 annexed the eastern part of the Bronx from Westchester County, which included the village of Wakefield, and the towns of Westchester, Eastchester, and part of Pelham. Thus New York County and therefore New York City then encompassed Manhattan and all of what is today the Bronx.



The City of New York: In 1897 New York State Governor Black signed the charter of the City of New York (it's 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. At the same time the Boroughs of the Bronx, Manhattan, Richmond, Brooklyn, and Queens were established. 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. The air mail stamp, issued in 1948, commemorated the Golden Anniversary of the City of New York.

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.

The specific date for the "beginning" of New York City on Manhattan Island is a matter of interpretation. The City Seal shows 1625. But when the U.S. Postal Service in 1953 issued a stamp commemorating the 300th Anniversary of the founding of the city, they used a date of 1653!!! That date was when New Amsterdam was 'incorporated" by the Dutch government.



Fine Tuning the City: Initially the Borough of the Bronx and the Borough of Manhattan were both in New York County, and the Borough of Queens occupied only the western part of Queens County. The excluded areas of eastern Queens County seceded from Queens County and formed Nassau County in 1899. So the earlier records of Nassau County will be found in Queens County. In addition, the City Council in 1975 officially changed the name of the Borough of Richmond to the Borough of Staten Island in line with popular usage.

To complete the change of political entities to what we find today, Bronx County was formed in 1914. At that time, we had five Boroughs coextensive with the five Counties that make up the present City of New York. So if you were to search for residents of the Bronx in various archives, you would look in Westchester County up to 1875, in either Westchester County or New York County (depending on which side of the Bronx they were in) from 1875 to 1895, New York County from 1895 to 1914, and then Bronx County from 1914 on.

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. The Creek was eventually filled in so that Marble Hill became part of the mainland of the Bronx and no longer on Manhattan Island.

Marble Hill, however, remained in Manhattan Borough and New York County. I checked the 1915 NY State and the 1920, 1930, and 1940 Federal Censuses and streets in Marble Hill appear on the New York County census sheets. 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 Marble Hill be placed in the Bronx but angry residents opposed the plan 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 put the area firmly back within New York County and the Borough of Manhattan.

The Street-Name Problem: One byproduct of the consolidation of the areas into the City of New York was the loss of autonomy of the small communities in Queens and Staten Island. Eventually those original communities grew together, and that created a problem with street names and house numbering, since a street could change its name every few blocks. Queens then underwent a massive street name change and address renumbering process in the 1910s and 1920s, which makes it difficult to locate old addresses on modern maps. Staten Island also changed many street names.

To resolve problems with old street names for the census locational tools on the Steve Morse "One Step" site (stevemorse.org), I found resources, such as street guides that showed old and new names and numbers, and old maps to find street name changes. I put the results in table format, so that researchers can convert an old street name or find information on an old house number to their modern equivalents (and vice versa). That resource called "Changed Street Names" is at <u>http://www.stevemorse.org/census/changes</u>. The utility contains information about street name changes for many cities of the United States, based on our own tables (some with help of volunteers) or links to such information on other websites. Below are parts of two of the Queens name change tables. On the left are old to new street names, and on the right are new to old names. Both show their section of Queens as well. The website also shows the conversion of old house numbers to the modern house numbers for streets in Queens. The website also has street-name conversion tables for Staten Island.

| BLEEKER AVE BLISS BLISS ST/PL BLOOMER PL BLOOMFIELD BLOOMFIELD | BLEEKER 46th 46th 63rd 85th 85th | RIDGEWOOD LONG ISLAND CITY LAUREL HILL RIDGEWOOD PLATEAU ELMHURST ELMHURST | 46th 46th 46th 46th 46th | BLISS ST/PL CLIFTON AVE 16th AVE BLISS CLIFTON AVE | LAUREL HILL LAUREL HILL LONG ISLAND CITY LONG ISLAND CITY LONG ISLAND CITY | |
|---|---|---|--------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| BLOOMINGTON | 161st ROAD | WOODHAVEN SOUTH | 46th | TITUS | LONG ISLAND CITY | |

Summary: Here's a Timeline for New York City and The City of New York

1625: Dutch found New Amsterdam, consisting of only Manhattan Island
1664: English take over city and rename it New York City
1683: Counties of Richmond, New York (Manhattan), Kings (Brooklyn) and
Queens created
1874: New York County annexes western Bronx from Westchester County
1895: New York County annexes eastern Bronx from Westchester County
1898: City of New York formed to include the counties of New York
(including the Bronx), Kings, Richmond, and western part of Queens
1898: The boroughs of Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens (western part), Bronx, and Richmond
established
1899: Eastern part of Queens County secedes from Queens County and becomes Nassau County
1914: Bronx County forms from the borough of the Bronx
1975: Borough of Richmond renamed Staten Island

1977: City Council changes date on City seal from 1664 to 1625

Conclusion and Credits: Although the history of New York City/City of New York is obviously unique to that area, it illustrates that an understanding of the history of street names and address number changes, the changing boundaries of communities, and what political units they were in, are often crucial for deciding which archives or collections have the information you seek. Location, Location, Location, isn't only the realtor's motto; it is the motto of successful genealogists as well.

I thank Steve Morse and Gloria Weintraub for providing critical comments on this paper.

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Added Bonus: References Used in Essay

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Street Change Information

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Marble Hill Example

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marble_Hill, Manhattan

http://myinwood.net/the-harlem-ship-canal/

Graphics

1870 Map of Top of Manhattan

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1870_Knapp_Map_of_Northern_Manhattan_%28_New _York_City_%29,_Harlem,_Washington_Heights,_Inwood_-_Geographicus_-_NorthernManhattan-knapp-1870.jpg

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