

The First Growth Cycle to 1820

ONLY IN NEW YORK

Any account of American urbanization must begin with the founding of New York. As Kenneth Jackson has pointed out, "Because the earlier settlements at St. Augustine (1565), Jamestown (1607), and Plymouth (1620) either disappeared altogether . . . or declined into insignificance, *New York stands as the oldest major city in what is now the United States.*"¹ And during the period covered in this chapter, New York was the *only* city of the three already in existence.

The images of New York are as old and diverse as its origins. Americans have always felt a certain ambivalence toward the city, as reflected in the figurative names they have used to refer to it; New York has been variously called "Gotham," "Baghdad-on-the-Subway," "Our Babylon," and, most recently, the "Big Apple."² Less laudatory images have always paralleled these affectionate terms, from the frenetic and menacing dystopia portrayed in Fritz Lang's early classic film *Metropolis*³ to, worse yet, Manhattan as the Hobbesian penal colony, sealed off and abandoned to criminals, as portrayed in John Carpenter's *Escape from New York*.

Most, however, have tried to capture the paradoxical nature of the city, often portraying it as the clichéd prostitute with a heart of gold; wisacre city; the city of the almighty buck; a lonely, private, and yet exciting place.⁴ The two icons of the city, engraved on its most popular postcards, are the Empire State Building, symbolizing Manhattan's verticality, and the Statue of Liberty, whose horizontal beacon welcomes newcomers, promising them hope—while often exploiting them to her advantage. Although the proportions are down from the beginning of the century and most immigrants arrive by air rather than by sea, even today almost half of all immigrants to the United States pass through New York's portals.

Almost from the start, New York demonstrated certain distinctive qualities: a relative disengagement from the battles of the nation, or at least a readiness to profit from them;⁵ location at a strategic harbor site, oriented more toward Europe than toward the American hinterlands and designed to connect the “New World” to a world system in which it was to become increasingly central; a magnet for a polyglot population devoted to (some say obsessed by) commerce and trade, ever ready to make deals, prepared to absorb newcomers and tolerate diversity, but almost always on its own gruff and condescending terms; and endowed with a fluid spirit of entrepreneurial adventurism and mobility, not only in goods but in politics, ideas, and culture.

WATER: THE DEFINING ELEMENT OF NEW YORK

The key to many of these characteristics lies with New York’s original function as a world port. I think Jan Morris, in her poetic paean to the New York harbor, has caught something when she calls the city “a landing-stage, a conduit, a place of movement . . . [whose] character is governed always by the successive tides of energy that flood perpetually through it. Not just fissile things, but peoples, ideas, philosophies—these are and always have been the prime commodities of the port of New York, and the city’s *raisons d’être*.”⁶

Certainly, others have long stressed the same fluidity. Walt Whitman, the quintessential bard of New York every bit as much as Carl Sandburg was Chicago’s, ends his 1860 tribute “Mannahatta” with the lines, “City of hurried and sparkling waters! city of spires and masts! \ City nested in bays! my city!”⁷ Later writers as well have evoked images and metaphors of water: the flow of people moving swiftly through the streets like a great river. If ever there were a consummate early example of the city as a “space of flows,” which Manuel Castells seems to suggest is a *postmodern* consequence of the “new [*sic*] informational age,” it has been New York.⁸

Such metaphors are telling. They hint at essence in ways that more prosaic accounts may miss, for water *is* both the matter and the semiotic of New York. Instead, then, of thinking about New York as a vast albeit fractured agglomeration of urbanized places, turn that image inside out, like reversing black-and-white responses in a Rorschach inkblot test. Consider, instead, that New York consists of a large, complexly shaped body of water, fringed with urban settlements that were once inaccessible to one another except by water.⁹ No one who has approached New York by air can doubt this.

Three states fringe this watery “core,” leading to the anomaly of an urbanized region that has *no overarching political system*—nor can it ever have. Indeed, the history of New York is replete with the invention of one after another political and/or economic expedient designed to overcome that fundamental fragmentation. George Carey’s description captures the essence of the site:

The area known as the New York Metropolitan Region . . . extends over those portions of the three states which adjoin where the waters of the Hudson and the Raritan Rivers mingle with those of the Atlantic Ocean, Long Island Sound, and the numerous bays, channels and kills of the port of New York and New



Figure 2.1. John Bachman(n), *New York Environs* (colored lithograph, 1859). Source: Special Collections of The New York Public Library, Eno Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints, and Photographs, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations; used by permission.

Jersey. . . . Twenty-two counties are roughly included within this metropolitan giant—one in Connecticut, nine in New Jersey, twelve in New York. The focal point of the region is New York City, located upon a group of islands at the junction of the principal bodies of water. *Of the five counties in New York City only . . . the Bronx is principally on the mainland.*¹⁰

RELATIONS OF CHICAGO AND LOS ANGELES TO WATER

The contrast of New York’s site with Chicago’s could not be more extreme. Located on an essentially featureless plane (a true alluvial plain) at the shore of Lake Michigan, Chicago has a physical organization (and pattern of expansion, even to this day) that is

stunningly simple. The symmetrical semicircular core expands almost monotonically into the featureless (plane) plain along the lakeshore, a pattern distorted only modestly by the sectoral divisions formed by radial rivers and rail lines. The entire political entity of Chicago is contained within a single county (Cook) that also encompasses an inner ring of suburbs on the north and south. Beyond Cook County are its five "collar counties" (Lake, Will, Kane, McHenry, and DuPage), which contain the overflow in independent suburbs and satellite towns.¹¹ And despite the fact that parts of Chicago's extended conurbation cross state lines into Wisconsin on the north and Indiana to the southeast, the functional planning unit falls essentially within Illinois state lines.

Despite the apparently propitious site, Chicago's location had little of the obvious imperative that determined New York's. Not until about the mid-nineteenth century, when local boosters wooed and cajoled the multiple organizers of the American railroad system to concentrate their midwestern terminals in Chicago, did the city consolidate its edge over such rivals as Galena and St. Louis. And if New York's insertion in the world system was contemporaneous with its founding, the city serving from the start as the key link between the New World and the "Old" across the Atlantic, Chicago was from *its* beginning an outpost—one that connected to the world system through the intermediary *hinge* that was New York.

The contrast of New York with Los Angeles is even more striking. Despite its glorious coastline and the fact that it now boasts one of the largest and busiest international seaports in the United States, if not the world, initially Los Angeles's site was even less promising than Chicago's. Los Angeles was bred of desert and mountains, not cradled in the lapping of an ocean or even an inland lake. And it must be noted that despite its current role as the country's largest manufacturing center and a major collector of the country's agricultural wealth, Los Angeles began with none of these economic advantages. It did, however, gain an important political advantage by accident of conquest.

If New York had to leap across multiple geographic and juridical barriers to forge an essentially polynucleated, complex, and difficult-to-coordinate urbanized region with no particular boundaries (e.g., not even Boswash is completely demarcated), whereas Chicago's urbanized region flowed smoothly outward from a single center with remarkably few barriers to deflect the stream until, at its northern and southern extremities, it merged geographically but not juridically with industrial complexes in northern Indiana and southern Wisconsin,¹² the urbanized region of Los Angeles, no matter how large it grew, remained within a single state.

Nonetheless, the city's form is highly complex and *discontinuous*, because it grew by the accretion of fragments, wedged essentially into the lowlands between barren hills, wherever it was feasible to bring in water.¹³ Unlike New York and Chicago, both well endowed with surface water and groundwater, that precious *sine qua non* of urbanism, Southern California is essentially semiarid.¹⁴ If left in its own natural state, its land is most appropriate for cattle grazing, which is what it was used for until the terminal years of the nineteenth century. Water was the magic ingredient required to create both rural and urban life in Southern California.

Political fragmentation, however, was mostly man-made. Although the city of Los Angeles is completely contained within the larger bounds of the county of Los

Angeles, the city's actual shape is peculiar: pockmarked with holes—small local communities that either resisted annexation to the city altogether or later opted out—as well as elongated by a narrow linear tail (the so-called shoestring addition). As we shall see in Chapter 6, it was Los Angeles's municipal control and then its subsequent loss of monopoly over the water supply that determined the politics of annexation and thus the unusual shape of the city. And the strange elongation of the city's boundaries to the south serves as the umbilical cord to its originally distant and discrete port of San Pedro. Around Los Angeles are five other counties whose urbanized "spots" are equally discontinuous, interspersed by either barren hills or lush agricultural valleys.

As we shall see in later chapters, these different physical settings played significant roles in giving to each region its distinctive character.

NEW YORK'S EARLY HISTORY AS A MULTICULTURAL MERCANTILE CITY

Manhattan Island's strategic location, at the mouth of the Hudson River where it widens into the bay that joins the Atlantic, made its harbor a particularly apposite site for a maritime city. Although during the ice ages the site of Manhattan had been far inland, the melting glaciers "scoured out the great rift of the Hudson River Valley . . . [making a depression] almost as deep as the Grand Canyon." And then, as the ocean level rose, "Manhattan, once situated on a plateau at least thirty-five hundred feet above the old sea level, became a low-lying island with tidewater on every side."¹⁵

Demographic diversity (multiculturalism?) also characterized the city from its inception. Note, in just this brief account, the variety of nationalities involved. For hundreds of years before Giovanni da Verrazano (a *Florentine* navigator in the service of the king of *France*) entered New York's Lower Bay in 1524, the lower tip of the island had served as a neutral point where *different Indian tribes* met to trade.¹⁶ In 1525 the mouth of the Hudson (then called Rio de San Antonio) was charted by a *Portuguese* sailor sailing under the auspices of the *Spanish* king. The next explorer to arrive, in 1609, was the *English* navigator Henry Hudson, whose ship, the *Half Moon*, sailed under sponsorship of a *Dutch* company (not until fifty years later would the river be renamed in his honor).

Despite these various claimants, it was the Dutch company that first established a fort on Manhattan in 1624, later calling it New Amsterdam. The settlement was from the start integrated into the expansive colonizing projects of the seventeenth-century world-system, whose leadership was the object of fierce contest between the English and the Dutch.¹⁷ The first settlers were some thirty families, mostly Walloons (*French speakers* from what would later become *Belgium*), who in May 1624 were deposited at the colony—some on Manhattan Island, but most at Albany, upstream. Their ship carried a return cargo of seven hundred otter and four thousand beaver skins, indicating the early linkage between the international fur trade and the colony.¹⁸

Later ships carried more colonists, and in 1626 Peter Minuit, who had been dispatched by the Dutch West Indies Company as director general of the New Amsterdam colony, which was headquarters of that company's North American operation, "bought" the island of Manhattan for its legendary sixty guilders (then twenty-

four dollars).¹⁹ This was perhaps a fitting start for a place where, it is said, anything can be bought and most things are for sale, even those that have been stolen.²⁰ The direct commercial purpose of the Dutch West Indies Company settlements at New Amsterdam and Albany upriver was to monopolize the fur trade, but profits were initially disappointing; furs were soon supplemented by timber and farm crops.²¹ By 1628 there were only about 270 settlers living around the Manhattan fort, and that number had risen only to some 1,500 by 1664, when the city was captured, without a shot, by the English.²²

During their brief rule, however, the Dutch had made important contributions to the site. They applied their not inconsiderable skills to reclaiming land from the marshy shores around the lower end of the island, not only widening the island but improving the dock areas (all on the eastern shore at that time) for the increasing number of ships that continued to come.

In the seventeenth century the shore line was naturally quite different from that of today. What are now Front, Water, and South streets were then covered with water at high tide. . . . What is now Broad Street in the early days was an inlet used as a canal. . . . It is not surprising that colonists from Holland, where land fill is almost a tradition, should have extended the shore line and widened the island, even at this early period.²³

The Dutch had also begun the agricultural development of the rich lands of the Hudson Valley, which were later to produce grain and milled flour for the international market, a more successful export than furs. Their small agricultural settlements at Harlem and Brooklyn gave lasting names to nuclei that would eventually be merged into the American city.

The British may have displaced the Dutch as the titular "rulers" of the colony, but the population continued to be polyglot. A Jesuit missionary who visited New Amsterdam in 1643 had recorded that eighteen different languages were represented among the four to five hundred men in Manhattan, drawn from various sects and nations.²⁴ This diversity persisted.²⁵ The early social structure, however, evidenced a basic paradox. Although the urban population was drawn from a wide variety of nations and cultures, and social mobility was certainly greater than on the European continent, the original upper class was drawn from a more narrowly defined set. Indeed, during the pre-independence period, under both Dutch and British rule, New York was "one of the more aristocratic colonies in North America," with an elite made up of intimately connected "manorial grandees, overseas merchants, and leading lawyers."²⁶

The Dutch West Indies Company had given huge land grants in the Hudson Valley to the original (and largely Dutch) patriciate, whose properties, because of primogeniture, remained largely intact over the generations, as contrasted with the partible inheritances more common in New England.²⁷ However, as Jaher stresses, for both nationalities rural-based fortunes and urban commercial prosperity were synergistically linked: "Agrarian aristocrats participated in commerce; conversely, leading urban businessmen frequently acquired vast up-country estates and speculated extensively in interior and city holdings, sometimes with manorial lords."²⁸ After the British

conquest, the original Dutch aristocracy was joined by English merchants, and intermarriage between Dutch landowners and newer important merchant "families" further consolidated this class. Despite the fact that the Dutch and English predominated, the ethnic diversity of the city "*permeated the upper stratum*" in growing numbers.²⁹

The intimate relationship between rural economic power and urban activities persisted after the ethnic diversification of the elite and, not surprisingly, was translated into political power at the city and state levels of government. "Virtually every great landed clan also ranked among the foremost mercantile families . . . [and their] [e]xtensive urban real estate holdings forged another tie between the landlords and the cities. Political power promoted the enterprises of the landed and mercantile magnates."³⁰ There was considerable nepotism as members of elite families occupied high public posts. Jaher notes that "Hudson Valley and Long Island merchant-barons and their relatives . . . also played important political roles in New York City and in Albany, thus serving their urban commercial interests."³¹

NEW YORK AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

At the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, the city had fewer than twenty thousand inhabitants, concentrated at the southern tip of Manhattan. After Washington's army retreated to the mainland, the island served as the main headquarters for British forces for the next nine years. Only in the last months of 1783, when the Continental Army formally took possession of the city, was the Union Jack lowered and the British military forces withdrawn.

However, the well-entrenched and multiethnic character of New York's aristocracy guaranteed a certain stability in the class structure even in the aftermath of war. Those of Dutch descent remained, and although some upper-class New Yorkers were evacuated with the British troops, their relatives (who had chosen "the right side of the conflict") remained behind to claim their lands. According to Jaher, this "prevented a radical disruption of the upper order." And even though the Revolution did cause some limited turnover in the ruling class, such "changes in upper class composition failed to appreciably alter its habits. Overseas trade remained central to the city's commercial life."³²

New York had been badly damaged during the war, losing "perhaps half its buildings through incendiarism, collapse, and pillage," but by 1787 it had already regained its prewar population.³³ Jackson notes: "Soon after the winning of national independence, New York began to surpass its rivals [Boston and Philadelphia]. By 1789, it was the leading city in the coasting trade. It exceeded Philadelphia in total tonnage in 1794, in the value of imports in 1796, and in exports in 1797. And early in the nineteenth century, the city on the Hudson emerged as the largest metropolis in the New World."³⁴ By 1800, Manhattan's population had risen to more than sixty thousand, pulling even with Philadelphia, previously the largest urban agglomeration in the United States. Ten years later, the population of Manhattan, together with its small neighbor, Brooklyn,³⁵ approached a remarkable one hundred thousand, for the first time surpassing Philadelphia.³⁶

Such primacy did not come without a struggle, however. Independence had its

costs. After the war, American ships were barred from participating in Britain's preferential trading relations with the West Indies and Europe, an exclusion that was challenged vigorously by American privateers. A British blockade coupled with the harassment of American vessels on the high seas culminated in the War of 1812, fought in part to secure an autonomous and safer role for American ships in international trade. But the wartime embargo the British imposed on American ports had one unintended consequence: it encouraged the development of import-substitute industries. "Behind the protective wall of commercial exclusion and then war, Americans began to manufacture things which they had been importing from Britain." Once the war was negotiated to an end, however,

British manufacturers . . . [seeking] to regain their lucrative American market . . . resolved . . . to sell their products . . . at a [temporary] loss . . . and as the hour for the peace treaty drew near they loaded ships with goods for the American market. When . . . the peace was ratified, [most of] these ships sailed . . . into New York's harbor where the goods were . . . "dumped" . . . at unusually low prices. This policy succeeded in bankrupting many American manufacturers. It also made New York particularly attractive to buyers from inland towns, who now went there in larger numbers, giving that port an obvious and fortuitous . . . advantage over the others.³⁷

The selection of New York as the port in which British shippers auctioned off (dumped) their goods was an advantage that New York's astute businessmen turned to permanent advantage by innovating techniques of credit and transaction ease that facilitated a concentration there of the commercial functions for the entire northern seaboard.³⁸

Jaher cites this as one of the three factors that consolidated New York's dominant position in the opening decades of the nineteenth century. The other two were the construction of the Erie Canal, which put the harbor of New York within water-transport reach of the Great Lakes (a development to be covered in more detail in Chapter 3), and the formation of the Black Ball Packet Line, which began frequent and speedy scheduled sailings between New York and Liverpool in 1817-18.³⁹ These sailings did more than transport goods and people. In an era when long-distance information was exceedingly sketchy, delayed, and irregular, the fact that New York's traders had even a brief "knowledge jump" on competitors in other ports meant that speculative fortunes could (and would) be made in the moments before news of international gluts and shortages diffused to other places. This too consolidated New York's advantage.⁴⁰

But even before the War of 1812 and the expansive boom period of New York that began with the extension of its trading hinterland via the Erie Canal (see below), the basic template for the physical city, or at least the island of Manhattan, to which it was largely confined until the end of the nineteenth century, had been unequivocally established. As Edward Spann notes, the gridiron plan of Manhattan adopted in 1811, which constituted the culmination of municipal decisions initiated as early as 1804, may have represented a major break with European traditions of more elegant city planning, but certainly no break with the pattern of Manhattan that was already

evident in the closing decades of the eighteenth century.⁴¹ While the plan clearly served the commercial/real estate preoccupations that characterize the city to this day, it merely extended to much of the rest of the island the pattern that had already been established by "private" owners when they divided up their large landholdings, at first into farm plots they leased to tenants and eventually into smaller house plots for self-constructed dwellings, as wage laborer gradually displaced yeoman and slave.

Prior to the war for independence, land in Manhattan was not viewed as "scarce," and therefore had not yet become a speculative commodity. When the wealthy invested in land, it was largely to "bank" their savings and to display their respectability through country estates. Blackmar has rightly pointed out that given the volatility of long-distance trade, land was at least a relatively secure place to park one's idle capital.⁴² But as population increased and the demand for building sites went up, some large landholders subdivided portions of their properties into small lots (often twenty-five by one hundred feet, which was to become the module size), which they leased to new settlers; the owners, however, were neither investors in housing nor builders. "Most leases provided that at the end of the term, tenants should remove within ten days any buildings they had added to the land. Well into the nineteenth century, aldermen complained of the nuisance caused by New Yorkers who moved houses to new locations at the expiration of their long-term ground leases."⁴³ As early maps of the island show, at least one large landholder, De Lancey, had subdivided his large estate just north of the shipyards in a gridiron pattern that would later become generalized. Successive maps show how this pattern was extended in a series of northward movements.

By 1811, at a time when Manhattan still had fewer than one hundred thousand inhabitants, the officially adopted subdivision of virtually the entire island as far north as Harlem provided for a future population many times that number.

The New York Plan of 1811, the master plan of the first great American metropolis, was devised to meet the needs of a moderate-sized Atlantic port. . . . Among several influences on the Plan was the fact that New York was emphatically not a political center; in the 1790s, it had lost its earlier roles both as the nation's first capital . . . and as the capital of New York State. Henceforth, considerations of design were subordinated to the more practical concerns of a city plainly commercial in character.⁴⁴

The design was scarcely imaginative and, indeed, was to prove remarkably ill adapted to later needs. It created, with few exceptions, an unvarying grid of narrow rectangular blocks via 155 uniformly narrow cross streets only two hundred feet apart (approximately twenty east-west streets to the mile).⁴⁵ On the other hand, the major and wider avenues traversing the north-south axis facilitated travel in those directions and were somewhat more practical, although the lack of any diagonals other than pre-existent Broadway compounded the permanent difficulty of crossing between the East and West Sides.

Anticipating future traffic, however, was not the purpose of the plan. Rather, the grid was designed to facilitate the subdivision of the entire island into module lots

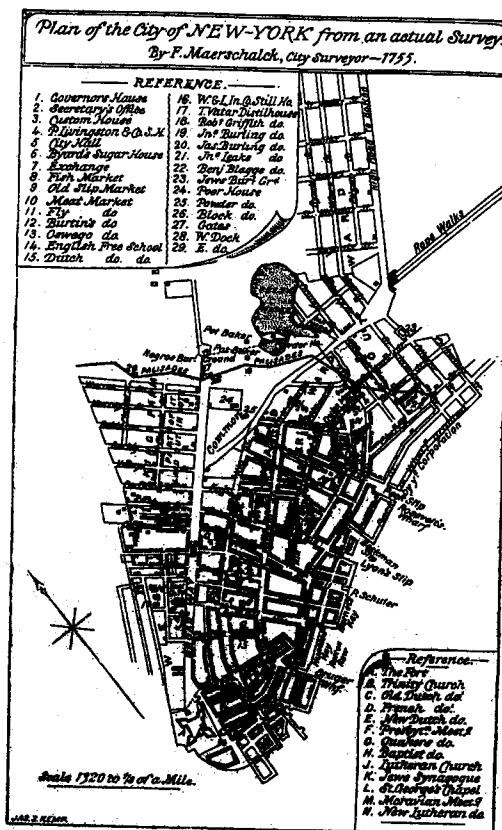


Map 2.1. Plan of New York in 1729, surveyed by James Lyne. Note the earliest organic character of the arrangement.

twenty-five feet wide and one hundred feet deep that, like coins of equal size, could be used as the currency of the realm—speculation. Imposed upon a topography far from level except at the lower parts of the island, provided with no diagonal avenue save the earlier Indian footpath of Broadway, with only a handful of public open spaces reserved (mostly in residual triangles formed by the intersection of Broadway with major avenues, in preexistent cemeteries, or on “useless” swampland), and with the streets running between the Hudson and East Rivers much too narrow to accommodate the cross-town traffic that would far exceed expectations, the plan proved short-sighted at best.

But the short-term gains were impressive. The plan facilitated a surge in urban land investments. The old alliance between the “rural” Dutch and English gentry of the Hudson Valley, the “robber barons” of the fur trade, and the merchants, shipping agents, and lawyers of Manhattan involved in international commerce was now consolidated and strengthened by urban land acquisitions.⁴⁶ German-born John Jacob Astor (who made his initial fortune in the fur trade) and his descendants would eventually become the largest landholders in Manhattan.⁴⁷

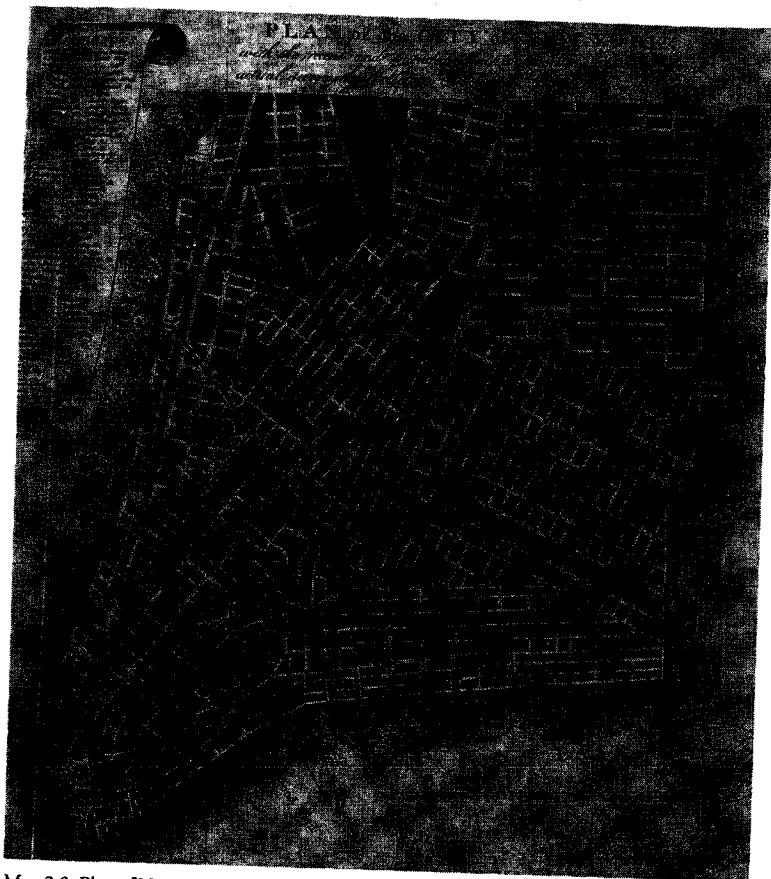
Members of this elite alliance were simultaneously working on plans for the Erie Canal, an ambitious venture that would jump-start a boom in New York City’s import and export functions, stimulate a rapid population increase, and, with it, an ex-



Map 2.2. Plan of New York City from an actual survey by F. Maerschalck, city surveyor, in 1755. Modest gridiron pattern develops at the edges.

plosive demand for urban lots. It would eventually lead to the founding of the city of Chicago, even though the canal’s terminus at Buffalo initially fell short of drawing all the Great Lakes into New York City’s trading hinterland. That would require even more investments in canals and, more important, in railroads that decisively displaced the attempts at waterborne transport.

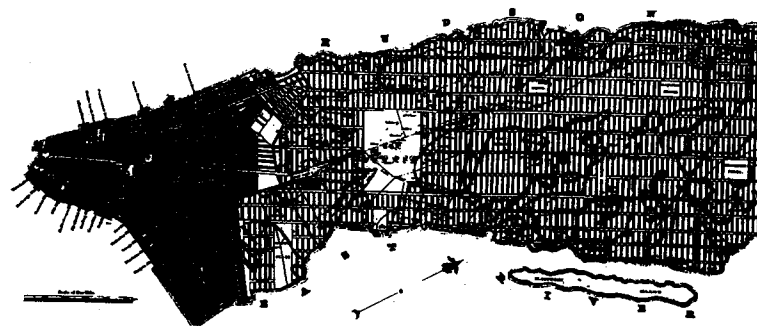
But these developments had to await the next cycle of urbanization. Before turning to this next phase, I want to describe briefly conditions at the sites of what were to become the American world cities of the future: Los Angeles and Chicago.



Map 2.3. Plan of New York City in 1807 with recent and intended improvements. Drawn from the actual survey by William Bridges, city surveyor, showing an intent to regularize the water edges and to unify existing grid patterns in the only portion of lower Manhattan subdivided before the 1811 plan.

LOS ANGELES UP TO THE 1820S

Few Americans would think to include Los Angeles as a "place" during this earliest phase of its history, even though the European "discovery" of the sites that were later to house New York and Los Angeles occurred almost simultaneously. Although New York was clearly *the* American city of this early period, only an Anglo East Coast-centric view of the United States can account for the fact that California is generally



Map 2.4. The 1811 subdivision map that plots Manhattan into the greatest grid. Five years later, the scheme was extended to the unsettled upper reaches of Manhattan Island.

ignored in American history until it was acquired from Mexico by force and joined the union as a state in 1850.⁴⁸ I hope to correct this tunnel vision here.

Taking a wider worldview, we must recognize that the "great discoveries" of the sixteenth century on the Atlantic coast were paralleled by similar ones on the Pacific, and both were parts of the same European goals of that century: to gain access to the markets of India and China via routes other than the traditional and shorter ones through the Middle East, over which Europe had failed to gain control. If 1492 represents the date of Christopher Columbus's efforts to find such a route by traveling westward, and 1498 marks Vasco da Gama's circumnavigation of Africa to reach the Orient by a southern and eastern route, the date of 1520, when Magellan finally circled South America, marks Europe's efforts to continue the westward route into the Pacific.

A few years after Magellan's historic voyage and only some eighteen years after the lower Hudson was "discovered" by Verrazano in 1524, the site that would host Los Angeles also came within the ken of Europeans, albeit exclusively Spanish. Less well known than Columbus, da Gama, or Magellan was Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, who sailed northward from New Spain (Mexico) to look for a northern route to Cathay, as well as to search for the still-elusive water passage thought to connect the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. According to Nelson's detailed account:

What Cabrillo found was California. . . . Cabrillo . . . was no ordinary sailing captain. He had been with Cortez during the capture of the wondrous Tenochtitlán and was one of the conquerors of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. . . . Cabrillo . . . left San Diego Bay October 3, 1542 and continued north along the coast for three days . . . [and] visited the islands of San Clemente and Santa Catalina. . . . On the 8th of October they came to the mainland in a large bay. . . . The following day they continued up the coast . . . [anchoring presumably in] Santa Monica Bay. . . . Cabrillo died on the voyage, but . . . his pilot reached at least Point Arena before heading back to New Spain.⁴⁹

Even though the prosperous sixteenth-century galleon trade between Manila and Acapulco sometimes coasted northward along the California shore before setting out for the Philippines, Spanish ships rarely made landfalls in northern California and never needed to stop in southern California. It was therefore not until 1602–3 that the shoreline between Acapulco and Oregon was finally surveyed by Sebastián Vizcaíno. In the course of his studies, he entered the bay he named San Pedro (now one of Los Angeles's ports) and reported on the attractiveness of the surrounding area. But although such early accounts stressed the richness of California and these descriptions entered the Spanish navigation books, Spain was preoccupied with even better sites. And thus it was not until 1768 that a land party was sent into the region, and for reasons that had little to do with its attractiveness.⁵⁰

Of the multiple land and sea probes involved in this particularly disastrous Spanish expedition, only a few survivors managed to link up at San Diego with Captain Gaspar de Portolá, who led them past the future site of Los Angeles on their way to the San Francisco harbor.⁵¹ Their experiences in the vicinity of Los Angeles-to-be were scarcely benign, although they appear tragically familiar to contemporary newspaper readers. On their way northward they were terrified by a series of earthquakes, and upon their return, "as they crossed the Los Angeles River they observed evidence of a recent great flood."⁵² Of the many catastrophes that have recently struck Los Angeles, only brushfires and drive-by shootings are not mentioned in Portolá's diary.

Beginning in the 1770s, the Spanish founded a number of missions in California, including one on the site of Los Angeles.

[In 1780] Captain Rivera began recruiting an authorized twenty-four married settlers and their families for the Los Angeles settlement. They were to be offered lands in California, ten pesos a month for three years, plus a daily allowance of rations. Complete personal outfits from saddles to shoes would be furnished each settler, as well as his farming needs: two cows, two oxen, two horses, three mares, one mule, two ewes, two goats, and tools, and equipment. Repayment was to come out of future production. . . . [Despite these generous incentives] [r]ecruiting the first civilian settlers for California proved extremely difficult.⁵³

In the end only fourteen families were recruited, of whom two deserted and another died of smallpox. The settler party ended up as eleven families—a total population of forty-four. Almost all of these were Indian, black, or mulatto.

Upon their arrival in 1781, the settlers followed a plan for settlement that placed them on high ground accessible to the river, established the central plaza, and even set out the dimensions of long strip-planting fields.⁵⁴ Each settler was assigned a building lot and four adjacent fields, only two of which were irrigable. "All the rest of the land . . . [was to] be held in reserve in the name of the King . . . [to] be awarded gratuitously to later settlers."⁵⁵ This final provision was to have long-lasting effects on the development of the metropolis that would grow from such humble beginnings.

Nelson describes Los Angeles in the years between 1781 and 1821 as a simple agricultural village living by subsistence farming, although "a few ranchos gradually

developed with sizable herds of cattle and horses." By 1790, the population of the impressively named place (literally Our Lady Queen of the Angels of Porciuncula) was still only 140. This number rose only gradually, to 315 by 1800, 365 by 1810, and 650 by 1820.⁵⁶

CHICAGO BEFORE 1820

There is even less to report on the development of Chicago during this first period, given that the first "permanent" cabin on the site dated back only to 1779, the U.S. fort only to 1803.⁵⁷ The town would not be chartered until the 1830s. If earth trembles, droughts, and an uneven flow of river water (the bed of the Los Angeles River sometimes flooding capriciously, other times drying to a narrow ditch) had made the site of Los Angeles inhospitable to settlement, too much water on the marshy bottoms along the shore of Lake Michigan would delay Chicago's settlement until the land could be stabilized by a series of canals. If in prehistoric times the site of Manhattan lay many miles inland from the ocean, the site of Chicago then lay beneath the waters of a lake much larger than now exists.

In modern times, Chicago's site had been "discovered" in the same fruitless search for a passage to the East Indies that had led earlier European adventurers to the sites of New York and Los Angeles. French "explorers" had found their way to Chicago's lakeshore by the late seventeenth century (Marquette and Jolliet in 1673 and La Salle and his associates in the 1680s), and these "discoveries" were used by the French to claim the much vaster Indian fur-trading territory around it. They were forced to concede their claim to the British in 1763, who in turn gave up their rights to the Americans in the Treaty of Paris, which ended the Revolutionary War in 1783.⁵⁸

But such shifting "rights" were never recognized by the existing inhabitants. Throughout, the true "rulers" of the region remained the Potawamis, who occasionally camped at the site they called Checagou.⁵⁹ The real hazards to American settlement of the site, then, came not from France or England, but from the native tribes who used it. It was not until 1795 that these original occupants were forced into an agreement that ceded a six-square-mile piece of land at the mouth of the Chicago River to pioneer settlers, and it was really not until the conclusion of the Black Hawk War in 1832 that large-scale settlement became possible.

The location of Checagou was potentially of critical importance, although the site required much work to make it hospitable to settlement. The central core of what became Chicago had, in prehistoric times, been under the water of an enormous inland lake; gradually, deposits built up the shoreline, but the land abutting the lake was a marsh in which the "wild onion" (probably garlic), whose odor inspired Chicago's Indian name, was the chief growth. Depressions left by glaciers created the beds of rivers that, with brief portage zones later excavated, almost opened Lake Michigan to the drainage basin of the Mississippi.⁶⁰ With the purchase of Louisiana from the French in 1803, access to this broad midcontinental waterway, with its outlet to world trade at New Orleans, strengthened the motivation of the United States to guard Chicago's site. The construction of Fort Dearborn in 1803 was thus no coincidence.

But Fort Dearborn had not been the first "European" settlement in what was to become Chicago. Perhaps symbolic of the city's "embarrassing" origin was the fact that the first "white" settler on the spot, Jean Baptiste Point du Sable (also referred to as Point De Saible), was actually a "black" man, perhaps a fitting start for a city whose "majority" population is now made up of "people of color." Acknowledgment of du Sable's prior claim as founder was periodically resisted by Chicago's later white elite. As late as the Chicago World's Fair of 1933-34, the black community of Chicago had to fight to have a replica of du Sable's cabin included in the exhibition.⁶¹ Although not all the facts are known, the evidence that du Sable was "founder" or at least builder of the first permanent cabin on the site in 1779 comes from "British records from the revolutionary period as well as the bill of sale for De Saible's homestead in 1800, a document completed three years before the U.S. government's Fort Dearborn was erected."⁶² When du Sable left, "the locale was sprinkled with settlers." John Kinzie, the city's putative founder, did not arrive until 1804.⁶³

However, it was members of the Kinzie family who were major forces in the true establishment of the city, involved from the start in the Canal Company, which prepared the site for development in the early 1830s, and in enticing the rail lines to locate their terminals at Chicago in the 1840s. John Kinzie's biography throws significant light not only on the development of Chicago in the decades to come but on the intimate connections between that history and the role New Yorkers played in creating the "Second City." Kinzie actually came to the area as the representative of the New York firm of John Jacob Astor, and his family never lost that affiliation, because one of his sons succeeded him in the post. While serving in that capacity, the son also became the "first president of the Village of Chicago, registrar of public lands, canal collector of tolls, receiver of public moneys, a large landowner," and was, as well, the founder of a savings association. Another son became "sheriff, an insurance agent, the president of the Chicago Board of Underwriters, a real estate speculator and Chicago's first auctioneer."⁶⁴

The Kinzie family was soon joined by other leading self-made men, such as Ogden (first president of the "city" of Chicago) and McCormick (inventor of the famous reaper and owner of one of the first industrial establishments in the city); most hailed either from New York or had business connections to the investors from that city. Their story, however, belongs more properly to the next chapter. Equally important were Chicago's roles as creditor for grain and other crops and as "commodifier" for sales of these items at distant points.⁶⁵

CHAPTER 3

Developments between the
1820s and the 1870s

MANHATTAN: AMERICA'S FIRST GLOBAL CITY

Sam Bass Warner Jr. singles out the period between 1820 and 1870 as the acme of urbanity in American cities and identifies New York as the quintessential example: "If the criterion of urbanity is the mixture of classes and ethnic groups . . . along with dense living and crowded streets and the omnipresence of all manner of business near the homes in every quarter, then the cities of the United States in the years between 1820 and 1870 marked the zenith of our national urbanity."¹ In many ways, one can claim that this pattern of urbanity still prevails in New York, at least in large portions of Manhattan, whose physical form was framed during this period.

Paradoxically, however, whereas land uses were mixed and classes and races interspersed, this did not ensure harmony in the nineteenth century—just as it does not in today's New York. A marked bifurcation of the class structure accompanied the remarkable economic advances of the nineteenth century. Warner is correct in claiming that whereas between 1776 and 1820 "America seemed to be moving toward a growing egalitarianism . . . beginning in the 1820s . . . the benign trends reversed themselves." And as workers organized to protest this growing bifurcation, social unrest grew. "All the big cities suffered epidemics of violence; there were labor riots, race riots, native-foreign riots, Catholic-Protestant riots, rich-poor riots. New York City alone underwent a series of riots, eight major and at least ten minor, between 1834 and 1871."² And, we might add, as elsewhere, increased residential segregation came to be seen as one way to insulate hostile social groups from one another.

It was during the period between 1820 and 1870 that New York surged ahead of all competitors to dominate an American urban system that was spreading westward