

New York's First Neighborhood:

Lower Manhattan Through the Centuries

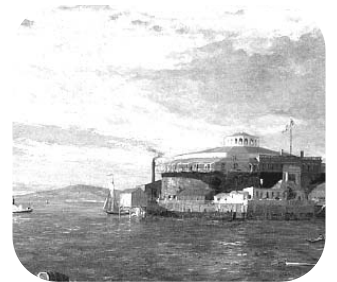


New York is often seen by strangers simply as an undifferentiated ant hill, where more than eight million urbanites and another thirteen million in the suburbs jostle anonymously for position and advantage. But the metropolitan region is actually a web of neighborhoods and small towns, each with its own unique history, look, and ethnic and economic makeup. Some, like Harlem and Greenwich Village, are famous around the world. Others, like Spring Creek and Egbertville, are known mainly to residents. The five boroughs alone count more than 450 distinct communities, stretching from Eastchester, Riverdale, and Williamsbridge in the north to Tottenville and the Rockaways in the south.

In one sense, the area south of Canal Street is simply another neighborhood, albeit one with bigger buildings and bigger stores than other places in Gotham. In recent decades, the financial district has once again become an area of mixed use, attracting thousands of families to its renovated spaces and new apartment buildings. Indeed, for at least two decades, lower Manhattan has been experiencing a renaissance, with new restaurants, parks, dry cleaners, museums, and grocery stores popping up where none existed earlier.

But lower Manhattan is not just another neighborhood. For almost four hundred years, it has been the heart of America's largest city. And prior to September 11, 2001, the gargantuan twin towers of the World Trade Center were central to the financial district's identity, economy, and internal circulation. They were of a different scale than other buildings, and not just in terms of height. Comprising huge footprints that reached straight to the sky, the WTC was easily the largest office complex on earth and was itself a small vertical city with its own zip code. Larger than life while they stood, they remain larger than life in our collective memory. What happens on that sixteen-acre site will affect the future of lower Manhattan every bit as much as it affected its past.

As we plan for the twenty-first century, it is instructive to look at the past. Recall, for example, that lower Manhattan was for centuries an important hunting and fishing area for the native Americans who once roamed the region. When Europeans first arrived in the form of Giovanni de Verazzano in 1524, Henry Hudson in 1609, and the Dutch West India Company in 1624, it was lower Manhattan that caught their attention. They saw an immense harbor, protected by the Narrows from North Atlantic storms, ice-free in all seasons, and with access to the continent's interior through the Hudson River. And they had encountered an island, thus defensible from hostile invasions overland or by sea.



Not only did New York's financial district become the headquarters of Dutch operations in the new world, but also for 175 years it was almost the only place of white settlement in the region. Newark and Brooklyn did not really prosper until the nineteenth century, and New York itself did not grow much beyond Chambers Street until after 1800. Lower Manhattan thus has a different "feel" from the rest of New York, and its streets are typically narrow and short because they were laid out before the 1811 grid was imposed on the rest of the city.

Meanwhile, the tiny contained neighborhood underwent extraordinary changes. After an initial period as a small village, lower Manhattan became a center of wholesale and retail trade, of ship-building and warehousing, and finally of financial services. The area below Canal Street gave birth to the nation's first stock exchange (1792), first chamber of commerce (1768), first public

transportation system (1829), and first regularly scheduled packet service (1818). It was where the trial of John Peter Zenger established the principle of freedom of the press. As the first capital of the United States, it was where George Washington took the oath of office as the new nation's first president. After 1800, when New York swept past Philadelphia to become the metropolis of the new world, lower Manhattan became the world's first "central business district," meaning that the citizens moved north as residential uses gave way to offices, warehouses, stores, and factories. Perhaps most importantly, it was in Dutch New Amsterdam, then located entirely in lower Manhattan, that members of various ethnic and religious groups first passed onto American shores. Appropriately, when Ellis Island opened in the late 19th century as the main receiving station for immigrants and when the Statue of Liberty became the physical symbol of American aspiration, they were located in the upper bay, adjacent to lower Manhattan.

After almost three centuries of primacy in New York, the financial district began to encounter serious competition from midtown Manhattan in the 1920s. The opening of the IRT subway in 1904, the completion of Pennsylvania Station in 1910, and the electrification of Grand Central Terminal in 1913 all undermined the centrality of Wall Street. Later, the passage of the Interstate Highway Act in 1956 began to push business and industries out toward the expressway interchanges, even as new container ship technology moved the bulk of the region's harbor traffic away from the Manhattan and Brooklyn docks and toward Port Newark in New Jersey. By 1950, America had a new central business district located in midtown several miles north of the Wall Street skyscrapers.

Just when it appeared that the future lay in midtown, the suburbs, and other regions of the nation, the financial district reinvented itself once again. Most important in this regard was the decision by the Rockefeller family in the late 1950s to build the new headquarters of the Chase Manhattan Bank near Wall Street. Soon thereafter, the Port Authority announced plans for a giant World Trade Center slightly northwest of the New York Stock Exchange. And by the 1980s, dozens of new skyscrapers were rising along the East River on Water Street and along the Hudson River in Battery Park City. By the year 2000, plans were well advanced for an impressive new stock exchange and for thousands of new downtown residential units.

What will be the impact of September 11, 2001 on the future of the financial district? No one can possibly know at this juncture. But history offers clues as to how we came to be where we are and allows us to make three observations about the neighborhood.

First, no other place in the United States has already undergone as much change as lower Manhattan. Nowhere else in the nation have the same parcels of land been built upon anew, so many different times.



Second, lower Manhattan had important geographical advantages from 1625 until 1955 as the region's main harbor and for many decades the greatest port in the world. But after 1955, intercontinental air travel superseded the passenger ship business, container ship technology undermined the Manhattan waterfront, and interstate highways pushed businesses and residents away from the financial district. If lower Manhattan is to retain its important role in the world economy, it must improve its roads, subways, and rail corridors so that it enjoys a geographical advantage once again.

Third, if the reconstruction and re-imagination of Ground Zero is successful, the zone will once again rank with the 1811 grid plan, Central Park, Rockefeller Center, and the subway system as defining physical symbols of New York. Alternatively, if we fail to create an environment of quality and vision, then September 11, 2001 might signal the end of New York's role as a world city.

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