

America's Heart

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GOTHAM:

A History of New York City to 1898

HOW a trading post in the wilderness grew to be New York City is one of the great stories of American history, and in this billowing volume Edwin G. Burrows, a Brooklyn College historian, and Mike Wallace, of the City University of New York, tell it stirringly. The dominant urban center on the North American continent since 1800, the metropolitan region of New York has attracted one of the largest populations in the world. New York's economic institutions eclipsed domestic competitors by the early nineteenth century and foreign competitors after the First World War. The city was, in the words of Walt Whitman, "the great place of the Western Continent, the heart, the brain, the focus, the main spring, the pinnacle, the extremity, the no more beyond of the new world."

New York's wealth lured people from everywhere. The populations of ancient Athens and Rome, early modern London and Paris, twentieth-century Tokyo and Mexico City, were enormous but homogeneous. In contrast, New York was at different times the largest Irish, Jewish, Italian, and black African city in the world. By 1860 nearly half of Manhattan's population was foreign-born, making New York the most polyglot metropolis on the globe. It remains so today.

The city's complexity has frightened not only residents and visitors but historians as well. Although multi-volume histories by Martha Lamb (1877-1896), Benson John Lossing (1884), and James Grant Wilson (1892-1893) celebrated and memorialized the "rise and progress" of the nineteenth-century metropolis, twentieth-century historians have avoided the topic. Chicago and other cities have generated larger and richer bodies of historical study.

Not any more. *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* represents the most comprehensive examination to date of the city's history prior to 1900. Indeed, few historians today attempt synthetic and comprehensive interpretations of this magnitude. The authors weave together the unique details of New York's history with a generation's worth of recent and original scholarship, insightfully reconceptualizing the city's past. With the publication of a second volume (scheduled for 2000, covering the twentieth century, and written by Wallace alone), *Gotham* may rank in importance with the multi-volume works on Thomas Jefferson by Dumas Malone and on the Civil War by Allan Nevins.

"Globalization" is repeatedly invoked to explain contemporary economic developments. For New York, however, globalization is hardly new. Burrows and Wallace persuasively argue that New York was "crucially shaped by ... an evolving global economy" from its founding, as New Amsterdam, in 1626. At first the settlement was of little import, especially in view of the wealth available to the Dutch from Asian spices, South American sugar, and African slaves. New Amsterdam offered modest profits in the fur trade, particularly in beaver pelts, which were its first significant commodity.

By the eighteenth century sugar and war had transformed New York's economy. By about 1720 a fifth to a quarter of the city's adult males worked as mariners, and half of the ships that used New

York's port traveled from or to the Caribbean. During King George's War (1744-1748) and the French and Indian War (1754-1763) the city's economy boomed. Not surprisingly, African slavery grew with it. By 1750 Africans made up more than 20 percent of the settlement's populace, and only Charleston, South Carolina, surpassed New York in the number of slaves and slave owners in a North American city. Legal slavery endured in New York until 1827.

New York's globally dependent economy in no time produced a multicultural city. Amsterdam, New York's original namesake, was a magnet for outcasts of every denomination: Walloons, Huguenots, Baptists, Quakers, Sephardic Jews, and English Calvinists (whom we remember as the Pilgrims). In less than two decades that legacy was apparent in the Dutch settlement of North America. By 1640 the New York region was the most heterogeneous in what would soon become British North America. The Jesuit missionary Isaac Jogues complained about the "confusion of tongues," counting eighteen different languages spoken by New Amsterdam's 400 to 500 inhabitants. For Jogues, the community was "Babel." Outside the city, Swedes, Germans, French, Belgians, Danes, English dissenters, Africans, and Indians lived in scattered settlements and on farms, resisting the comparatively ordered, homogeneous villages of Puritan New England. Half a century later the majority of New York's populace were religious "nonconformists." The absence of a uniform denominationalism and religious orthodoxy continued into the eighteenth century, weakening imperial power and advancing individualism, pluralism, and anti-authoritarianism. The city was ripe for revolution by the 1770s.

After the American Revolution the Napoleonic Wars and American neutrality enabled New York's port to become the continental entrepôt. From about 1790 to 1807 the value of imports entering the city rose from \$1.4 million to \$7.6 million. By then New York's imports were almost double those of

its rival Philadelphia. More noteworthy were exports, whose value increased tenfold, from \$2.5 million to \$26 million. By the 1820s customs duties collected in New York were so abundant that they subsidized the entire operation of the federal government, excepting interest on the national debt. At mid-century the port of New York accounted for a third of the nation's exports and half of its imports. Most significant, the flow of commodities linked New York to the three economic engines of the century: the manufacturing Midlands of Great Britain, the cotton-producing American South, and the agricultural Midwest, the breadbasket of America. New York, according to the writer George Train in 1857, was "the locomotive of these United States."

NEW YORK'S economic ascendancy was not simply the product of "natural" economic forces. Consider the rise of manufacturing. By 1860 the city's 4,375 factories employed 90,204 workers and led the nation in industrial output. Indeed, more than 10,000 labored in the city's 539 ironworks alone. But why did the republic's industrial core emerge on the little island of Manhattan? As Burrows and Wallace reveal, no single explanation suffices. For instance, banks were reluctant to lend to small manufacturers, limiting entrepreneurial artisans to cheap rental spaces in the warehouse districts. Manufacturers wanted to be near the port and thereby to their distant markets -- and they wanted access to one another. Cabinetmakers located adjacent to sawmills, dealers, and auction houses. Iron foundries made steam boilers for shipyards, tanks for gas companies, and architectural ornaments for builders, all of whom relied on importers, machine shops, and repairmen. Finally, the Manhattan economy was labor-intensive; "people-power" was the main source of energy. Firms found it convenient to set up shop near the low-wage proletariats stacked in the city's tenements. Elsewhere *Gotham* exposes the all-too-often hidden and ignored divisions within the city's social groups. By the nineteenth century, for example, New York's elite had split between older

Knickerbockers and newer Yankees, between established merchants and emerging industrialists. Similarly, Irish immigrants and their descendants were not a homogeneous impoverished mass. Archbishop John Hughes and fellow conservative Irish Catholics spoke for traditionalists, whereas other Irish were attracted to working-class radicalism, ethnic nationalism, and Tammany Hall's political pragmatism. Even post-Civil War reformers were a mixed bunch, including the purity zealot Anthony Comstock, evangelicals associated with the Salvation Army and the White Cross, proponents of the Social Gospel such as Walter Rauschenbusch and Henry Codman Potter, and settlement-house workers such as Stanton Coit and Lillian Wald.

Much of Gilded Age New York was characterized by furtive working-class revolt and conservative reaction. The Society for the Suppression of Vice and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children were founded to regulate the behavior of the poor and the working-class. Abortion was criminalized. Organized labor was crushed and lost the eight-hour day. Even Henry George's nearly successful mayoral campaign of 1886 served as a wake-up call for Tammany Hall. Over the next decade the political machine consolidated its operations and "became the Friend of the Working Man, but not of workingmen." In 1896 the Populist presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan became the first Democratic nominee since 1848 to lose both New York and Brooklyn.

Armories were a telling symbol of the new industrial order. In the two years following the nationwide railroad strikes of 1877 the Astors, the Stewarts, the Vanderbilts, and the Morgans, among others, raised more than \$500,000 to construct the opulent Seventh Regiment Armory. Only six years later lack of interest on the part of that same elite compelled Joseph Pulitzer, the editor of the New York *World*, to plead with city schoolchildren and the working poor to collect \$120,000 to complete the Statue of Liberty. No wonder the physician Elihu Hubbard Smith complained that

New Yorkers thought of nothing but "Commerce, News, & Pleasure." For him, "The history of the City of New York is the history of the eager cultivation & rapid increase of the arts of gain."

CRITICS repeatedly proclaim that New York is unrepresentative of the American city, let alone of the United States -- too big, too rich, too extreme in many ways. For Burrows and Wallace, however, New York's story is the nation's. Local history is a prism through which to view the history of the United States. By the 1880s, for example, J. P. Morgan and other financiers were appalled at the growing chaos and unpredictability of the national economy. Unrestrained competition, railroad rate wars, depressions, strikes, and armed battles in the streets did little to attract foreign investment. Morgan's solution, developed in his Wall Street office, was to merge the leading industries into a workable number of large corporations, to be managed, of course, by his fellow investment bankers in New York City. Over the ensuing two decades Morgan pioneered new financial instruments and economic organizations and succeeded in consolidating the republic's economy under the sponsorship of Manhattan's banking elite.

By 1900 New York was the national headquarters for the modern business structure -- the corporation. Indeed, nine of the eleven major trusts that emerged shortly after 1882 (including oil and sugar) were headquartered in New York. As the historian Kenneth T. Jackson has written, "In 1895, the metropolis contained 298 mercantile and manufacturing firms worth more than one million dollars, more than Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, San Francisco, Baltimore, and St. Louis combined." The deposits in New York banks were equal to the sum of all those in the rest of the United States. The "Wall Street law firm," epitomized by Sullivan and Cromwell, Davis Polk & Wardwell, and Paul Cravath, became a national institution, servicing Morgans, Seligmans, Harrimans, and Schiffs. According to Jackson, by every important measure -- from population to

industrial output to bank deposits to wholesale trade -- New York ranked first in the country. And unlike London, Paris, Berlin, Tokyo, or Vienna, New York was not a national or even a state capital.

implicitly demonstrates a persistent pattern in the city's history. New York's pluralist traditions enabled popular, even radical, movements periodically to emerge and flourish, only to be snuffed out by various economic forces. Pre-Revolution egalitarianism and post-Revolution radicalism gave way to Federalist accommodation. Alexander Hamilton and other New Yorkers eliminated confiscatory assaults on private property, replaced rule by self-appointed committees with the rule of law, admitted former Tories to the full privileges of citizenship, and ensured that large institutions like Columbia College and Trinity Church remained under the control of the propertied classes. In 1836 two thirds of the city's workingmen were members of more than fifty confederated unions; before the end of 1837 the unions were wiped out by a national depression. Resurgent unionism after the Civil War met the same fate in the Panic of 1873.

The vast infusion of foreign and domestic capital into New York's money markets contributed to the defeat of the city's multiple democratic movements. European investors, worried about political instability after the French Revolution and the 1830 and 1848 uprisings, sought secure places of investment. As Latin America proved increasingly unstable, investors such as Britain's House of Baring and Europe's House of Rothschild increasingly looked to New York. When the city needed a new water supply, for example, the House of Rothschild, among others, rounded up \$12 million in investment to construct the Croton reservoir system.

More important, as the American railroad system became the world's largest, speculators learned that the New York Stock & Exchange Board executed investment orders on short notice. By the

1840s New York brokers were the nation's largest traders in state, federal, bank, canal, insurance, and, of course, railroad securities. No wonder the editor James Watson Webb gloried in the use of armed troops to mow down Astor Place demonstrators in 1849. Such a response to politics in the street was, for Webb, "an excellent advertisement to the Capitalists of the old world, that they might send their property to New York and rely upon the certainty that it would be safe from the clutches of red republicanism, or chartists, or communionists of any description."

The transformation of New York into an investment haven came at a severe price. Not only was the city overcrowded and dirty -- it was deadly. Each year from 1850 to 1860 more than half the city's children under the age of five died. Seventy percent of children two years old or younger expired. In fact, the death rate exceeded the birth rate. By 1865 the richest city in North America had a death rate 50 percent higher than London's or Philadelphia's. The high mortality was hardly surprising, given that New York was literally awash in excrement. In the 1870s the city's 40,000 horses generated 400 tons of manure, 20,000 gallons of urine, and almost 200 carcasses *daily*. Sadly for city residents, both the horse population and the horse itself grew larger, and the situation worsened: a decade or two later 60,000 horses were dropping 1,250 tons of manure and 60,000 gallons of urine a day -- a dramatic threefold increase.

BURROWS and Wallace do not present only tales of sunshine and shadow. *Gotham* is filled with engaging vignettes and vivid narratives. The stories of Abraham Lincoln's visits to New York in 1860 and 1861, the description of the draft riots of 1863 (still the deadliest incident of urban disorder in American history), and the portrait of the Coney Island entertainment landscape of the 1880s are among the best short historical accounts readers will find anywhere.

Admittedly, the bombardment of facts may overwhelm some readers. Few, perhaps, will find the eighteenth-century political divisions between the Morris Livingston "landed interest" and the De Lancey "mercantile interest" significant. Others may question the need to know the number of bottles of Madeira, port, and beer consumed at Governor George Clinton's dinner for the French ambassador in 1783. Some may tire of the particulars regarding the proliferation of central heating, indoor plumbing, toilets, gas lights, and cast-iron stoves in elite nineteenth-century homes.

But "God is in the details," as the architect Mies van der Rohe said. On page after page Burrows and Wallace reveal how cultural and social practices Americans now take for granted originated in New York. The city was the birthplace of window shopping, American bohemia, the Associated Press, and the hot dog. New York "domesticated" Christmas, as the writers Washington Irving and Clement Clarke Moore created the Santa Claus we know today. Terms like "confidence man," "chum," "kick the bucket," and "so long" had their first uses in New York. After the birth of the penny press, in the 1830s, New York newspapers enjoyed the world's largest circulations. By 1860 the *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung* boasted the largest circulation of any German-language newspaper in the world. The beginnings of Delmonico's, Brooks Brothers, Lord & Taylor, HarperCollins, the savings bank, the Chinese laundry, and even the Belmont Stakes (named after August Belmont, of the House of Rothschild) are embedded in New York's ascendancy.

Most people recognize that New York was at the architectural forefront. The first cast-iron building in the nation was erected there in 1848; five years later Elisha Graves Otis displayed the first elevator, or "safety hoister"; and in 1857 the Haughwout Building became the nation's first edifice to incorporate both features. By the 1870s New York claimed to have the world's tallest office buildings (the Western Union Building and the Tribune Tower, both 1875) and North America's

largest enclosed space (Grand Central Depot, 1871). Richard Morris Hunt's Studio Building, on Tenth Street, was the first structure in the United States or Europe to be erected expressly for artists. By 1892 McKim, Mead, and White, with 120 draftsmen, was the largest architectural firm in the world. Many may be surprised to learn that when the Academy of Music opened its doors, in 1854, it was the largest opera house in the world. Or that the Mother Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church, unveiled in 1840, was then perhaps the world's largest black-owned Protestant church. Or that the Emigrant Refuge and Hospital, opened on Ward's Island in 1847, was the world's largest medical complex by 1860.

At times *Gotham* reads like an encyclopedia organized around a chronological narrative. Consider New York's many "firsts." Robert Fulton's *Clermont* (1807) was the world's first steamboat. Washington Irving's *A History of New York* (1809), better known as *Knickerbocker's History*, was the first major American literary work widely read in Europe. James Watson Webb's Native American Democratic Association, founded in 1835, was the nation's first nativist political organization. The first baseball game was played in 1842 on a vacant lot at 27th Street and Madison Avenue. And Jacob Little was the New York stock market's first full-time "operator."

Some specialists will find errors. For example, prostitution was never legal in New York. The authors offer conflicting figures on the African-American population in 1865. Their association of France's Napoleon III with Mayor Fernando Wood is unpersuasive -- indeed, charges of Napoleonic authoritarianism were also leveled at Wood's opponents. Environmental historians may fault Burrows and Wallace for downplaying New York's ongoing exploitation of nature and failing to address the questions raised by William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis* (1991) and other recent urban histories.

But these are minor quibbles. New Yorkers a century or two ago, like many today, knew little of their city's past. Consider historic Federal Hall, on Wall Street. It was erected in the eighteenth century as New York's city hall; there the Stamp Act Congress and the Continental Congress met, and George Washington was inaugurated as the first President of the new republic. Twentieth-century Americans revere the site as hallowed ground, a national landmark. For nineteenth-century New Yorkers, however, tradition and history were too easily forgotten: in 1812 the hall was torn down, and in 1842 a new Custom House was built on the site.

In 1856 *Harper's* lamented that New York was the least appreciated of the world's great cities. "Why should it be loved as a city? It is never the same city for a dozen years together. A man born in New York forty years ago finds nothing, absolutely nothing, of the New York he knew."

With *Gotham*, New Yorkers no longer have such an excuse.

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