

NEW YORK

Descriptions of Eighteenth-Century NEW YORK before the Revolution

*from a Boston physician in 1697, a Boston widow in 1704, a Maryland physician in 1744,
a Swedish botanist in 1750, and an Anglican clergyman in 1760.*

◆ “well seated for trade, the ships bound out being quickly at Sea.” 1697.

Dr. Benjamin Bullivant, *A Journal with Observations on my Travel from Boston in N[ew]. E[ngland]. to N[ew]. Y[ork]., New-Jersies & Philadelphia in Pennsylvania*, 1697, excerpts.¹

Bullivant was a Boston physician who had been appointed attorney general of the Massachusetts Bay colony in 1686.

. . . The city is well seated for trade, the ships bound out being quickly at Sea, having a good and safe harbor, Capable to entertain whatsoever number of ships may happen to come in, and in case of being pressed by an enemy, may Run up Hudson river a hundred miles, if they think fitting, into the Country. To secure them from Ice & storms, they have also an out wharf, made of great length like that at Boston . . .

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¹ Wayne Andrews, ed., “A Glance at New York in 1697: The Travel Diary of Dr. Benjamin Bullivant,” *The New-York Historical Society Quarterly*, 40:1 (January 1956), pp. 55-73. Permission pending.

within which their small craft and Lesser ships lie safe and secure, all weathers whatsoever. It now appears that their ancient buildings were very mean, amongst whom their townhouse makes but a mean figure, though sufficient to keep court above and a Goal [sic; jail] underneath.

. . . their streets Nasty & unregarded . . . which they excuse at this time, saying the Multitudes of buildings now going forward are the Occasion,² but being over, the City government will rectify all those matters. They have many public wells, enclosed & Covered, in the Streets. I do not know I ever saw above [more than] one pump. Most bricked houses have the date of the year on them, contrived of Iron cramps to hold in the timber to the walls. Their shops very irregular, & few or none open, & to most of you go up with 5 or 6 steps some of stone, Most of wood. N.Y. has several wide Large and orderly streets, & across them sundry narrower, in which notwithstanding are many Very good buildings & tradesmen of note, it being not regarded where a man lives in N.Y. as to his trade, for all are known, sundry trees³ are frequently set at the doors. The signs are usually well done here. The children of rich parents are usually without shoes or stockings, and young maids (especially Dutch) wear morning gowns all day Long and bare footed. Indeed I cannot say I saw any of the Dutch that were tolerably well dressed, though rich enough to wear what they pleased. They are a parsimonious people & expend Little on their livelihood, which makes them usually well moneyed, & good paymasters.



Map of New York . . . engraving by Thomas Kitchin, "senior hydrographer to his Majesty," 1778

◆ “a pleasant, well compacted place.” 1704.

Sarah Kemble Knight, Travel journal, 1704-1705, excerpts.⁴

A Boston widow, Knight travelled to New York City in the autumn of 1704 to complete some family business.

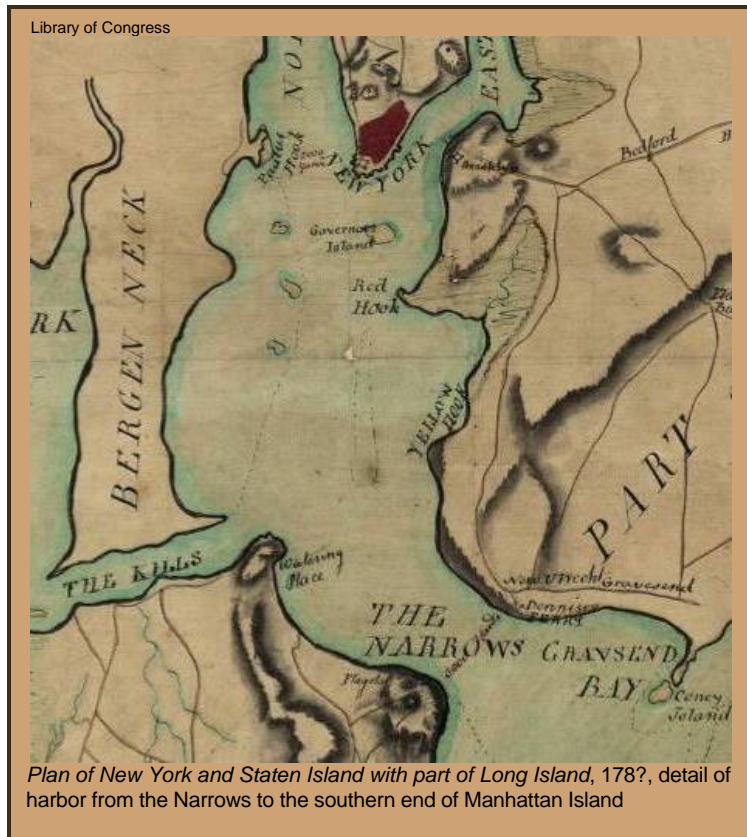
The City of New York is a pleasant, well compacted place, situated on a Commodious River which is a fine harbour for shipping. The Buildings [are] Generally very stately and high, though not altogether like ours in Boston. The Bricks in some of the Houses are of divers Colors and laid in Checkers; being glazed look very agreeable. The inside of them are neat to admiration, . . .

They are Generally of the Church of England and have a New England Gentleman for their minister, and a very fine church set out with all Customary requisites. There are also a Dutch and Divers Conventicles, as they call them, viz. [namely] Baptist, Quakers, &c [etc.]. They are not strict in keeping the Sabbath as in Boston and other places where I had been, But seem to deal with great exactness [accuracy/honesty] as far as I see or Deal with. They are sociable to one another and Courteous and Civil to

² I.e., the many buildings being built are the cause.

³ Presumably: signs.

⁴ First published in 1825 as *The Journal of Madam Knight*, ed. Thomas Dwight; spelling and punctuation modernized.



Library of Congress

Plan of New York and Staten Island with part of Long Island, 178?, detail of harbor from the Narrows to the southern end of Manhattan Island

strangers and fare well in their houses. The English go very fashionable in their dress. But the Dutch, especially the middling sort, differ from our women, in their habit go loose, wear French muches which are like a Cap and a headband in one, leaving their ears bare, which are set out with Jewels of a large size and many in number. And their fingers hoop't with Rings, some with large stones in them of many Colors as were their pendants in their ears, which You should see very old women wear as well as Young.

They have Vendues [auctions] very frequently and make their Earnings very well by them, for they treat with good Liquor Liberally, and the Customers Drink as Liberally, and Generally pay for't as well, by paying for that which they Bid up Briskly for, after the sack has gone plentifully about, tho' sometimes good penny worthy are got there. Their Diversions in the Winter is Riding Sleights about three or four Miles

out of Town, where they have Houses of entertainment at a place called the Bowery, and some go to friends' Houses who handsomely treat them. Mr. Burroughs carry'd his spouse and Daughter and myself out to one Madame Dowes, a Gentlewoman that lived at a farm House, who gave us a handsome Entertainment of five or six Dishes and choice Beer and metheglin,⁵ Cider, &c., all which she said was the produce of her farm. I believe we met 50 or 60 sleights that day — they fly with great swiftness and some are so furious that they'll turn out of the path for none except a Loaden Cart. Nor do they spare for any diversion the place affords, and sociable to a degree, their Tables being as free to their Neighbours as to themselves.

Having here transacted the affair I went upon and some other that fell in the way, after about a fortnight's stay there [14 days] I left New-York with no Little regret, and Thursday, Dec. 21, set out for New Haven [Connecticut] with my Kinsman Trowbridge . . .

◆ “I was tired of nothing here but their excessive drinking.” 1744.

Dr. Alexander Hamilton, *Itinerarium*, 1744, excerpts.⁶

A Maryland physician, Dr. Alexander Hamilton (not the Founding Father) took a four-month journey from Maryland to Boston and back in 1744, keeping a diary (itinerarium) that displayed his caustic wit as well as his impressions of the places he visited.

July 9, 1744. . . . It is a very rich place, but it is not so cheap living here as at Philadelphia. They have very bad water in the city, most of it being hard and brackish. Ever since the negro conspiracy,⁷ certain people have been appointed to sell water in the streets, which they carry on a sledge in great casks and bring it from the best springs about the city, for it was when the negroes went for tea water that they held

⁵ An alcoholic liquor made of fermented honey, often containing a spice or medicinal substance: a kind of mead. [Webster's]

⁶ Full text online in American Notes: Traveling in America, 1750-1920, in American Memory, Library of Congress, at hdl.loc.gov/loc.gdc/lhbtn.02374.

⁷ The “Negro Conspiracy” of 1741. Over one hundred slaves and poor whites were convicted of arson, and some executed, after a series of destructive fires across the city.

their cabals [secret meetings] and consultations, and therefore they have a law now that no negro shall be seen upon the streets without a lanthorn [lantern] after dark.

In this city are a mayor, recorder, aldermen, and common council. The government is under the English law, but the chief places are possessed by Dutchmen, they composing the best part of the House of Assembly. The Dutch were the first settlers of this Province, which is very large and extensive, the States of Holland having purchased the country of one Hudson, who pretended first to have discovered it, but they at last exchanged it with the English for Saranam,⁸ and ever since there have been a great number of Dutch here, tho' now their language and customs begin pretty much to wear out, and would very soon die were it not for a parcel of Dutch domines⁹ here, who, in the education of their children, endeavour to preserve the Dutch customs as much as possible. There is as much jarring here betwixt the powers of the Legislature as in any of the other American Provinces.

They have a diversion here very common, which is the barbecuing of a turtle, to which sport the chief gentry in town commonly go once or twice a week.

There are a great many handsome women in this city. They appear much more in public than at Philadelphia. It is customary here to ride thro' the street in light chairs. When the ladies walk the streets in the daytime they commonly use umbrellas, prettily adorned with feathers and painted.

There are two coffee-houses in this city, and the northern and southern posts [mail] go and come here once a week. I was tired of nothing here but their excessive drinking, for in this place you may have the best of company and conversation as well as at Philadelphia.

...

Sept. 11, 1744. I was sorry to leave New York, upon account of being separated from some agreeable acquaintance I had contracted there, and at the same time I cannot but own that I was glad to remove from a place where the temptation of drinking (a thing so incompatible with my limber constitution) threw itself so often in my way. I knew here several men of sense, ingenuity, and learning, and a much greater number of fops, whom I choose not to name, not so much for fear of giving offense as because I think their names are not worthy to be recorded either in manuscript or printed journals. These dons commonly held their heads higher than the rest of mankind, and imagined few or none were their equals. But this I found always proceeded from their narrow notions, ignorance of the world, and low extraction, which indeed is the case with most of our aggrandized upstarts in these infant countries of America, who never had an opportunity to see, or (if they had) the capacity to observe the different ranks of men in polite nations, or to know what it is that really constitutes that difference of degrees.



⁸ Surinam, on the northeast coast of South America; now the Republic of Suriname.

⁹ Clergy of the Dutch Reformed Church.

◆ “it vies with them [Boston and Philadelphia] for supremacy.” 1750.

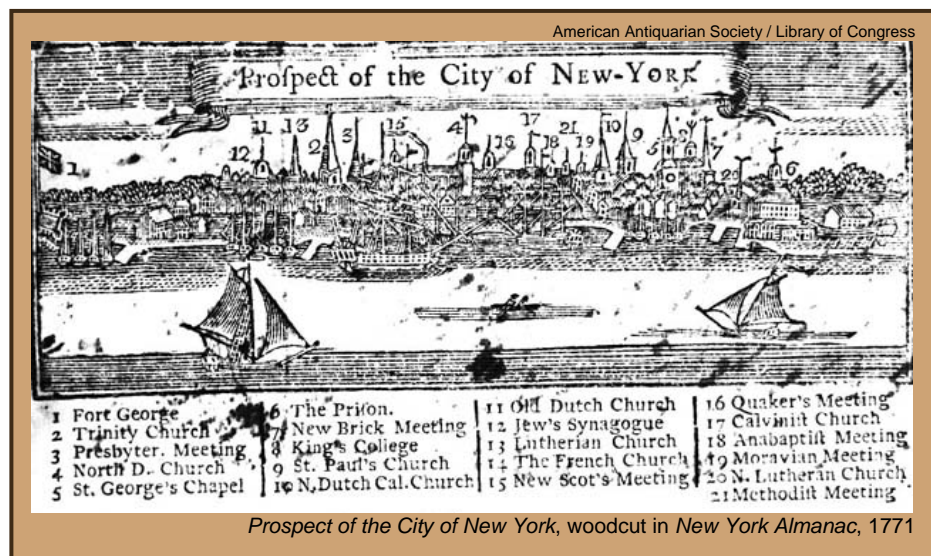
Peter Kalm, *Travels into North America* [1750], 1770, English edition, excerpts.

A Swedish botanist, Kalm travelled through the middle and northern colonies and into French Canada, compiling an extensive survey of the region's plants, animals, peoples, and cultures, always interwoven with his personal impressions.

The town was first settled by the Dutch. This, it is said, was done in the year 1623, when they were yet masters of the country. They called it New Amsterdam, and the country [colony] itself New Holland. The English, toward the end of the year 1664, taking possession of it under the command of Sir Cartes [Carteret], and keeping it by virtue of the next treaty of peace, gave the name of New York to the town and the province belonging to it.

In size it comes next to Boston and Philadelphia, but with regard to fine buildings, opulence, and extensive commerce, it vies with them for supremacy. . . .

The streets do not run so straight as those of Philadelphia, and sometimes are quite crooked. However, they are very spacious and well built, and most of them are paved, except in high places where it has been found useless. In the chief streets there are trees planted, which in summer give them a fine appearance, and during the excessive heat at that time afford a cooling shade. I found it extremely pleasant to walk in the town, for it seemed like a garden. . . .



Prospect of the City of New York, woodcut in *New York Almanac*, 1771

There are several churches in the town which deserve mention.

1. The *English Church* [Anglican], built in the year 1695, at the west end of town, is built of stone, and has a steeple with a bell.
2. The *New Dutch Church*, which is likewise built of stone, is pretty large, and is provided with a steeple. It also has a clock, the only one in the town. . . .
3. The *Old Dutch Church* is also built of stone. It is not so large as the new one. . . . The men for the most part sit in the gallery, and the women below.
4. The *Presbyterian Church*, which is pretty large and was built but lately. It is of stone, and has a steeple and bell in it.
5. The *German Lutheran Church*.
6. The *German Reformed Church*.
7. The *French Church*, for Protestant refugees [Huguenots].
8. The *Quakers' Meeting House*.

To these may be added the *Jewish Synagogue* which I mentioned before.

Besides the different sects of Christians,¹⁰ many Jews have settled in New York, who possess great

¹⁰ This paragraph on the Jews of New York appears earlier in Kalm's account.

privileges.¹¹ They have a synagogue, own their dwelling-houses, possess large country-seats, and are allowed to keep shops in town. They have likewise several ships, which they load and send out with their own goods. In fine, they enjoy all the privileges common to the other inhabitants of this town and province. . . .

The *Port* is a good one. Ships of the greatest tonnage can lie in it, close to the bridge; but its water is very salt[y] as the sea continually washes into it, and therefore is never frozen except in extraordinarily cold weather. This is of great advantage to the city and its commerce, for many ships enter or leave the port at all times of the year unless the winds be contrary, a convenience which, as I have before observed, is wanting [lacking] at Philadelphia. It is secured from all violent hurricanes from the southeast by Long Island, which is situated just in front of the town; therefore only the storms from the southwest are dangerous to the ships which ride at anchor here, because the port is open only on that side.

Trade in New York. New York probably carries on a more extensive commerce than any town in the English North American provinces; at least it may be said to equal them. Boston and Philadelphia however come very close to it. The trade of New York extends to many places, and it is said they send more ships from there to London that they do from Philadelphia. They export to that capital all the various sorts of skins which they buy of the Indians, sugar, logwood, and other dyeing woods, rum, mahogany and many other goods which are the produce of the West Indies, together with all the specie [coin money] which they get in the course of trade. Every year several ships are built here which are sent to London and there sold, and of late years a quantity of iron has been shipped to England. In return for all these, cloth is imported from London and so is every article of English growth or manufacture, together with all sorts of foreign goods.

England, and especially London, profits immensely by its trade with the American colonies; for not only New York but likewise all the other English towns on the continent import so many articles from England that all their specie, together with the goods which they get in other countries, must all go to Old England to pay their accounts there, for which they are, however, insufficient. Hence it appears how much a well regulated colony contributes to the increase and welfare of its mother country.



◆ “one great inconvenience, which is the want of fresh water.” 1760.

Rev. Andrew Burnaby, *Travels through the Middle Settlements in North-America. In the Years 1759 and 1760*, London: 1775.

An Anglican clergyman from England, Andrew Burnaby travelled throughout British America from Virginia to Massachusetts.

At the point I embarked for New York and, after a pleasant passage over the bay, which is three leagues wide, and various delightful prospects of rivers, islands, fields, hills, woods, the Narrows, New York city, vessels sailing to and fro, and innumerable porpoises playing upon the surface of the water, in

¹¹ I.e., in comparison to most Jews in Europe, where they were usually segregated and their privileges limited by law and tradition.

an evening so serene that the hemisphere was not ruffled by a single cloud, arrived there about the setting of the sun.

This city is situated upon the point of a small island, lying open to the bay on one side, and on the others included between the North and East rivers, and commands a fine prospect of water, the Jerseys, Long Island, Staten Island, and several others, which lie scattered in the bay. It contains between two and three thousand houses, and 16 or 17,000 inhabitants, is tolerably well built, and has several good houses. The streets are paved and very clean, but in general they are narrow. There are two or three,

indeed, which are spacious and airy, particularly the Broad-Way. The houses in this street have most of them a row of trees before them which form an agreeable shade and produce a pretty effect. The whole length of the town is something more than a mile, the breadth of it about half an one. The situation is, I believe, esteemed healthy, but it is subject to one great inconvenience, which is the want of fresh water, so that the inhabitants are obliged to have it brought from springs at some distance out of town.

There are several public buildings, though but few that deserve attention. The college, when finished, will be exceedingly handsome. It is to be built on three sides of a quadrangle fronting Hudson's or North river and will be the most beautifully situated of any college, I believe, in the world. At present only one wing is finished, which is of stone, and consists of twenty-four sets of apartments, each having a large sitting-room with a study, and bedchamber. They are obliged to make use of some of these apartments for a master's lodge, library, chapel, hall, &c. but as soon as the whole shall be completed, there will be proper apartments for each of these offices. The name of it is King's College [later Columbia].

There are two churches in New York, the old and Trinity Church, and the new one, or St. George's Chapel, both of them large buildings, the former in the Gothic taste with a spire, the other upon the model of some of the new churches in London. Besides these, there are several other places of religious worship; namely, two Low Dutch Calvinist churches, one High Dutch ditto, one French ditto, one German Lutheran church, one Presbyterian meeting-house, one Quakers ditto, one Anabaptists ditto, one Moravian ditto, and a Jews synagogue. There is also a very handsome charity-school for sixty poor boys and girls, a good work-house, barracks for a regiment of soldiers, and one of the finest prisons I have ever seen. The court or stadt-house makes no great figure, but it is to be repaired and beautified.

There is a quadrangular fort, capable of mounting sixty cannon, though at present there are, I believe, only thirty-two. Within this is the governor's palace, and underneath it a battery capable of mounting ninety-four guns, and barracks for a company or two of soldiers. Upon one of the islands in the bay is an hospital for sick and wounded seamen, and upon another a pest-house. These are the most noted public buildings in and about the city.

