

New York City

Organization and governmental structure

Organization

New York City is the most populous city in the United States with a population of over eight million. The City consists of five boroughs:

Manhattan – population 1,546,856

The Bronx – population 1,354,068

Brooklyn – population 2,488,194

Queens – population 2,237,815

Staten Island – population 457,383

In 1898, New York City took the organizational form in which it exists today. Prior to 1898, New York City consisted of Manhattan and the Bronx. In 1898, a new municipal government was created by new legislation from the state legislature; no voter approval was required. The city was divided into five boroughs. The Boroughs of Manhattan and The Bronx covered the original city and the rest of New York County. The Borough of Brooklyn consisted of the City of Brooklyn as well as several municipalities in eastern Kings County. The Borough of Queens was established in western Queens County, and covered several small cities and towns, including Long Island City, Astoria and Flushing. The Borough of Staten Island contained all of Richmond County.

All municipal governments contained within the boroughs were abolished.

Government

New York City is governed pursuant to the New York City Charter. The charter is enacted and amended by the New York State legislature. Though subservient to the State of New York, the city historically enjoys a high degree of autonomy.

Each borough elects a Borough President; however, under the current city charter, the Borough President's powers are limited with only a small discretionary budget to spend on projects within the borough.

The executive branch of New York City is headed by the Mayor, who is elected by direct popular vote. The mayor has executive authority over five divisions of city government as well as broad emergency powers.

Legislative power in New York City is vested in a unicameral City Council, which contains 51 members. A bill passed by a simple majority is sent to the mayor, who may sign it into law. If the mayor vetoes the bill, the Council has 30 days to override the veto by a two-thirds majority vote.

Partial Timeline of New York City Consolidation

1827

The very first movement to consolidate Village of Brooklyn w/ NYC started by Brooklyn real estate developers; it is ultimately unsuccessful.

1834

NYS Greater NY Committee submits a resolution to unite NYC and Brooklyn ("... it would create most magnificent city in the universe.")

Apr 8 - Brooklyn granted city charter over NYC objections

1850

Senate committee explores uniting NYC and Brooklyn but reports against the idea; minority view says the union would end antagonism between the cities

1856

Brooklyn State Senator (and former Brooklyn mayor) Cyrus P. Smith introduces resolution for union of NYC and Brooklyn but it's defeated; the measure called for the landfilling of the East River!

1868

Dec 30 - Report of the Central Park Commission authored by A. Green suggests consolidation of all of Greater NY

1882

Sen. Grady proposed 30 citizens draw up a Consolidation charter

1887

Fall - Delegation from Chamber of Commerce of the State of NY (CCSNY) met with NYC Mayor Hewitt to complain about the crowded, dirty state of the city and to encourage civic improvements

1888

Jan - Mayor Hewitt proposes massive civic improvements to keep NYC competitive and efficient

May - CCSNY's Annual Report supports Hewitt's initiative and encourages consolidation; Real Estate Record and Builder's Guide follows suit

June - Noting that Baltimore, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Boston were growing through annexation, the Real Estate Record encourages NYC to set up a Commission to explore consolidation

1889

Mar - A. Green proposes creating a Greater NY Commission to explore the consolidation question; the bill passes Assembly and Senate, but fails to get a "third reading" and dies; resistance came from Brooklyn senators & uptown real estate owners including the new Tammany mayor Hugh Grant

1890

Mar 4 and later - Encouraged by the CCSNY, A. Green renews his request that the legislature create a Greater NY Commission; they pass the proposal; passage was secured with help of Green's Albany lobbyist and the support of major papers

May 8 - Gov. Hill signs the act creating the Greater NY Commission

June 3 and later - A. Green was made President and JST Stranahan made VP of the Greater NY Commission; public hearings held; maps drawn; Commission is unanimously in favor of consolidation

Dec 11 - Greater NY Commission directs a consolidation bill be drawn and presented to next legislature

1891

Apr 6 - A Green presents his Consolidation Bill to Greater NY Commission; the bill includes geographic boundaries as well as a description of the new city's administration and charter; the Commission sends it to Albany

Apr 7 and later - Consolidation Bill ('91) introduced in both chambers; the bill dies (presumably because it is too inclusive re: administration and charter)

NOTE: After the defeat of the Consolidation Bill, Green and the Commission decided upon another course: they pressed for a referendum (which would eventually be non-binding and vague so as to be as inoffensive as possible); just getting a referendum bill alone passed would eventually take three tries; their arguments were fourfold:

1. To merchants and bankers they argued the benefits and efficiencies of a unified harbor and municipality
2. To Brooklyn real estate interests they argued the benefits of civic improvements (eg., water supply, streets, sewers), lower taxes, public works and debt relief
3. To good government advocates they argued the potential benefits of a rebuilt charter that would have to come with consolidation: ending patronage abuses; widening the talent pool of public officials to include honest, enlightened men from the outer regions, and monitoring only one administration instead of dozens
4. To the voters at large (the poor and anti-socialists in particular) they argued that a unified city would help reduce "poverty, disease, crime and mortality" by relieving crowding in the slums: as Brooklyn became developed and accessible,

tenement-dwellers would have access to affordable, safe sanitary housing there; Brooklynites would benefit by the improvements and tax benefits (see #2) hastened by this influx in population

1892

Jan 18 - A. Green presents his Referendum Bill ('92) to the Commission

Mar 3 - Referendum Bill ('92) came up in Legislature again and was strenuously opposed by most Brooklyn members

Mar 15 - Referendum Bill ('92) came up in Legislature again and was tabled

1893

Jan 12 - A. Green submitted his new Referendum Bill ('93) to the Commission; it was essentially similar to the first

Jan 25 - Referendum Bill ('93) introduced in the legislature

Mar 9 to Apr 5 - Referendum Bill ('93) is fought over, but dies in committee

Apr 11 - Commission met again; they agree to press on

Oct 24 - Candidates for state legislature declare their position regarding Consolidation in response to the circular of the Consolidation League

Nov - Many pro-consolidation Brooklyn representatives elected

1894

Feb 8 - Referendum Bill ('94) passed the Assembly by 106 to 7

Feb 27 and later - Referendum Bill ('94) passed the Senate by 18 to 7; signed into law by Gov. Flower; the bill does not make mention of consolidated city's form of government

NOTE: Consolidationists distributed leaflets, sent speakers, enlisted "good government" organizations and newspapers to gain support for consolidation; opposition came from two sources: the Brooklyn Eagle (which feared the end of an independent Brooklyn and the influence of Tammany politics in their city) and Tammany Dems; Manhattan real estate interests were divided

Nov 6 - Referendum is held; all towns vote in favor except Westchester, Flushing and Mt. Vernon (which asked to be included in the vote); Brooklyn votes for union by only 277 of 129,000 votes

Nov 13 - Greater NY Commission decides to seek union first, charter later

Nov 21 - Anti-consolidation Brooklyn League of Loyal Citizens (BLLC) formed by leading (Protestant) cultural and religious leaders with intent to set aside results of

first referendum and hold another ("resubmission"); anti-consolidationists argued the following points:

1. Consolidation would not lower Brooklyn's taxes because NYC was already committed to a number of costly projects which, when added to Brooklyn's needs, would boost the current rates
2. Union with NYC would overrun Brooklyn with slums filled with alien, impoverished, criminal newcomers
3. Union would destroy Brooklyn's cherished middle-class, Protestant way of life – a moral and quiet place filled with homes, churches, clubs, cultural institutions
4. Meddling by non-Brooklynites would ruin the city's cherished school system

Nov 25 - The women of Brooklyn organized to oppose Consolidation

1895

Jan thru May - The picture gets a little blurry as to what exactly happened in the legislature now, but the sequence is roughly as follows:

1. Green introduces bill to have his commission and the mayors devise a new charter
2. Gov. Morton proposes bill in which he names new commission to draft charter
3. Legislature ignores both bills
4. Independent Republican Mayor Strong battles with Regular Republican Platt (see more on Platt below) over some issues (the Raines Law?); Platt is accused of planning to use the restructuring that will come with Consolidation to weaken the mayor
5. Platt and his Republicans adopt Gov. Morton's bill, but add Green's name as one of the commissioners to dispell accusations of factionalism (we'll call this bill Consolidation Bill ('95)
6. BLLC rallies opposition to Consolidation Bill ('95) and kills it (see May 16)

NOTE: In 1894 Republicans gained control in New York State, with Thomas C. Platt as the "Easy Boss" of the party. Seeing advantages in consolidation, Platt decides to embrace the concept. Why? Here are some theories:

1. Consolidation would bolster Republican party prestige and maybe steal Greater NY from the Dems by adding Republicans from outside Manhattan to the NYC electorate
2. He could control Greater NY's government from Albany through state commissions (and thus punish some indepenent Republicans in NYC --like Mayor Strong-- and Brooklyn)
3. He would be hailed by the businessmen who championed the idea in the first place

BLLC claims membership of 50,000 and a petition of 72,000 anti-consolidation

signatures; Brooklyn Eagle sponsors anti-consolidation essay and song contests

Feb 15 - Members of the BLLC speak against Consolidation Bill ('95)

Mar 17 - BLLC sent anti-consolidation circular to legislature

Apr 29 - Brooklyn Common Council commits against consolidation

May 14 - Assembly passed Consolidation Bill ('95) without referendum amendment

May 16 - Consolidation Bill ('95) killed in the Senate; Brooklyn Mayor Schieren telegraphed Gov. Morton that the public sentiment in Brooklyn demanded a new referendum

mid-Dec - Platt held a Greater NY strategy meeting with a few fellow Republicans at Brooklyn home of Benjamin Tracy; Gov. Morton, who had been a compromise candidate between independent Republicans and regular Republicans, was invited; the governor theoretically signed on with their plans, provided they did not intend to conduct a patronage raid on the Greater NY police, fire, etc. departments as part of the plan

Dec 31 - Gov. Morton, getting cold feet and hearing rumors that Platt intended to do a patronage raid, wrote Tracy that he wanted out of their agreement and suggested they support resubmission

1896

The BLLC successfully lobbied for the introduction of a "resubmission" bill, but it did not pass

Jan 9 - Platt decides to make his move; at his direction, his close associate NYS Senator Clarence Lexow – whose name is strongly affiliated with his anti-corruption police hearings – pilots a resolution thru the legislature creating a joint committee on Affairs of Cities (which can appoint a joint sub-committee - which they did) to report by March 1, 1896

Jan 17, 18, 24, 25 - Joint sub-committee holds hearings in Brooklyn

Jan 29 - Joint sub-committee holds hearings in Albany

Feb 1 - Joint sub-committee holds hearings in NYC

Feb 25 - Joint sub-committee submitted their report with their Consolidation Bill ('96) to the legislature; the bill, similar to Gov. Morton's 1895 bill, gave the boundaries for the new city as A. Green had proposed originally; consolidation would take effect 1/1/98; the three mayors, A. Green, the State Engineer, the State Attorney General and nine governor appointees would draft a new charter; a proposal to exclude Flushing, Jamaica and Hempstead from Greater NY was rejected; but two minor Tammany amendments to help protect against a patronage raid were accepted

Mar 11 - Consolidation Bill ('96) passed in Senate 38 to 8

Mar 26 - Consolidation Bill ('96) passed Assembly 91 to 56; bill was then sent to the mayors of NYC, Brooklyn and LIC for approval or veto

Apr 2,3,4 & 7 - Mayor Wurster of Brooklyn holds hearings

Apr 10 - Mayor Wurster vetos the Consolidation Bill ('96); Mayor Gleason of LIC approves it

Apr 14 - Mayor Strong of NYC vetos the Consolidation Bill ('96)

Apr 15 - State Senate passed the Consolidation Bill ('96) over the mayors' vetos 34 to 14

Apr 28 - A BLLC-supported anti-consolidation mass-meeting held at Cooper Union to try to persuade the governor not to sign the bill

May 11 - After some hesitation – and a letter to Platt expressing his distaste for the Platt's tactics – Governor Morton signs the Consolidation Bill ('96) into law; apparently he was assured that there are enough safeguards to prevent a patronage raid

June 9 - Gov. Morton appointed his nine members to the Charter Commission;

1897

Jan 2 - Full Charter Commission met formally to receive the Charter and the report from Drafting Committee

Jan 4 and later - Public hearings were held for two weeks; minor changes were made based on the hearings, but the general scheme was unaffected; Committee on Revision made final changes

Feb 17 and 18 - Final charter was ready to submit to legislature; the charter protected Brooklyn interests by providing for equal taxes and assessments, exempting Brooklyn landowners from taxation for the first six months, adopting a borough form of local government (with borough presidents), and preserving the borough's cherished independent school system; the charter created a slightly modified version of the "strong mayor" design that had already existed in NYC and Brooklyn; it ignored some new reform improvements, but preserved many existing ones; the charter shifted much control over the new city's physical development, planning, and improvement from the state to the city government; all in all the new charter satisfied most interests, but was still very flawed

Mar 3 and 10- The committee heard objections to the charter

Sometime before passage of the charter - The NYS Chamber of Commerce as well as other institutions that had fought for consolidation urged caution, revision, and delay; furthermore, with Gov. Morton out of office and Platt-supported Gov. Black in, Platt revived the possibility of a patronage raid to harass Mayor Strong; this soured

Strong's business and civic allies on the charter; but Tammany was now behind the plan, Brooklyn opposition had withered, and Platt was determined to see it through

Mar 17 - The charter was reported to both Houses with minor amendments

Mar 23 - The charter passed the Assembly 117 to 28

Mar 25 - The charter passed the Senate; it was then referred back to the three mayors

Apr 1, 2 - NYC Mayor Strong held hearings

Apr 5 - Brooklyn Mayor Wurster held his first hearing

Apr 8 - Mayor Wurster returned the charter with his approval

Apr 9 - Mayor Strong vetoed the charter, suggesting amendments

Apr 12 - The Assembly passed the charter over the Mayor Strong's veto

Apr 13 - The Senate passed the charter over the Mayor Strong's veto, 34 to 10

May 4 - Gov. Black signed the charter, making it law

CONSOLIDATION DAY:

Dec 31 - Crowd of 50,000 complete with band, fireworks, singers marched down Broadway to City Hall Park; two minutes before midnight whistles blow; San Francisco Mayor raises flag via long distance electric switch; church bells ring; 100 guns salute. In Brooklyn there was a reception and a celebration with six former mayors . In LIC the Mayor conducted business as usual and the Board of Aldermen was in session until midnight; no formal celebrations held.

1898

Jan 1 - Mayor Van Wyck addressed a crowd at City Hall at noon (he had taken the oath of office several days before)

Source: Museum of the City of New York

