The Bronx is the northernmost of the five boroughs of New York City. Coextensive with Bronx County, it was the last of the 62 counties of New York State to be incorporated. Located north of Manhattan and Queens, and south of Westchester County, the Bronx is the only borough that is located primarily on the mainland (a very small portion of Manhattan, the Marble Hill neighborhood, is physically located on the mainland, because of the rerouting of the Harlem River in 1897). The Bronx's population is 1,385,108 according to the 2010 United States Census. The borough has a land area of 42 square miles (109 km2), making it the fourth-largest in land area of the five boroughs, the fourth most populated, and the third-highest in population density.

The Bronx is divided by the Bronx River into a hillier section in the west, closer to Manhattan, and the flatter eastern section, closer to Long Island. Technically, the West Bronx is divided from the East Bronx by Jerome Avenue—the continuation of Manhattan's Fifth Avenue—making the West Bronx roughly one-eighth the size of the East Bronx. The West Bronx was annexed to New York City (then largely confined to Manhattan) in 1874, and the areas east of the Bronx River were annexed in 1895. The Bronx first assumed a distinct legal identity when it became a borough of Greater New York in 1898. Bronx County, with the same boundaries as the borough, was separated from New York County (afterwards coextensive with the Borough of Manhattan) as of January 1, 1914.

Although the Bronx is the third most densely populated county in the U.S., about a quarter of its area is open space, including Woodlawn Cemetery, Van Cortland Park, Pelham Bay Park, the New York Botanical Garden and the Bronx Zoo in the borough's north and center, on land deliberately reserved in the late 19th century as urban development progressed northwards and eastwards from Manhattan with the building of roads, bridges and railways.

The Bronx River was named after Jonas Bronck, who created the first settlement as part of the New Netherland colony in 1639, and eventually lent its name to the entire borough. The native Lenape were progressively displaced after 1643 by settlers. The Bronx received many Irish, German, Jewish and Italian immigrants as its once-rural population exploded between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries. They were succeeded after 1945 by African Americans and Hispanic Americans from the Caribbean basin — especially Puerto Rico and later the Dominican Republic, Jamaica and Albania. In recent years, this cultural mix has made the Bronx a wellspring of both Latin music and hip hop.

The Bronx contains one of the five poorest Congressional Districts in the U.S., the 16th, but its wide variety of neighborhoods also includes the affluent and middle to upper income Riverdale, Schuylerville and Country Club. The Bronx, particularly the South Bronx, saw a sharp decline in population, livable housing, and the quality of life in the late 1960s and the 1970s, culminating in a wave of arson. Since then the communities have shown significant redevelopment starting in the late 1980s before picking up pace in the 1990s into today.

The history of the Bronx during the 20th century may be divided into four periods: a boom period during 1900–29, with a population growth by a factor of six from 200,000 in 1900 to 1.3 million in 1930. The Great Depression and post World War II years saw a slowing of growth leading into an eventual decline. The mid to late century were hard times, as the Bronx declined 1950-85 from a predominantly moderate-income to a predominantly lower-income area with high rates of violent crime and poverty. The Bronx has experienced an economic and developmental resurgence starting in the late 1980s that continues into today.

For generations a mostly rural area of small farms supplying the city markets, the Bronx grew into a railroad suburb in the late 19th century. Faster transportation allowed for rapid population growth in the late 19th century, involving the move from horse-drawn street cars to elevated railways and the subway system, which linked to Manhattan in 1904.

The South Bronx was for many years a manufacturing center and in the early part of the 20th century was noted as a center of piano manufacturing. In 1919, the Bronx was the site of 63 piano factories employing more than 5,000 workers.

At the end of World War I, the Bronx hosted the rather small 1918 World's Fair at 177th Street and DeVoe Avenue.

The Bronx underwent rapid urban growth after World War I. Extensions of the New York City Subway contributed to the increase in population as thousands of immigrants came to the Bronx, resulting in a major boom in residential construction. Among these groups, many Irish Americans, Italian Americans and especially Jewish Americans settled here. In addition, French, German, Polish and other immigrants moved into the borough. The Jewish population also increased notably during this time. In 1937, according to Jewish organizations, 592,185 Jews lived in The Bronx (43.9% of the borough's population), while only 45,000 Jews lived in the borough in 2002. Many synagogues still stand in the Bronx, but most have been converted to other uses.

In Prohibition days (1920–33), bootleggers and gangs were active in the Bronx. Irish, Italian and Polish gangs smuggled in most of the illegal whiskey. The oldest sections of the borough began to become poverty stricken areas.

Between 1930 and 1960, moderate and upper income Bronxites (predominantly non-Hispanic Whites) rapidly began to relocate from the southwestern neighborhoods of the borough. This migration has left a mostly poor African American and Hispanic (largely Puerto Rican population in the West Bronx. Most predominantly non-Hispanic White communities today are located in the East and northwestern sections of the county.

From the mid-1960s to the late-1970s, quality of life for Bronx residents declined sharply. Historians and social scientists have put forward many factors. They include the theory (elaborated in Robert Caro's biography The Power Broker) that Robert Moses' Cross-Bronx Expressway destroyed existing residential neighborhoods. Another factor in the Bronx's decline may have been the development of high-rise housing projects.

Yet another may have been a reduction in the real-estate listings and property-related financial services (such as mortgage loans or insurance policies) offered in some areas of the Bronx — a process known as redlining. Others have suggested a "planned shrinkage" of municipal services, such as fire-fighting. There was also much debate as to whether rent control laws had made it less profitable (or more costly) for landlords to maintain existing buildings with their existing tenants than to abandon or destroy those buildings.

In the 1970s, The Bronx was plagued by a wave of arson. The burning of buildings was predominantly in the poorest communities, like the South Bronx. The most common explanation of what occurred was that landlords decided to burn their low property-value buildings and take the insurance money as it was more lucrative to get insurance money than to refurbish or sell a building in a severely distressed area. The Bronx became identified with a high rate of poverty and unemployment, which was mainly a persistent problem in the South Bronx.

Out of 289 census tracts in the Bronx borough, 7 tracts lost more than 97% of their buildings to fire and abandonment between 1970 and 1980; another 44 tracts had more than 50% of their buildings meet the same fate. However, starting in the 1990s, many burned-out and run-down tenements were replaced by multi-unit housing. By the early 1980s, the South Bronx was considered one of the most blighted urban areas in the country, with a loss of 60% of the population and 40% of housing units.

Since the late 1980s, significant development has occurred in the Bronx, first stimulated by the city's "Ten-Year Housing Plan" and community members working to rebuild the social, economic and environmental infrastructure by creating affordable housing. Groups affiliated with churches in the South Bronx erected the Nehemiah Homes with about 1,000 units. The grass roots organization Nos Quedamos' endeavor known as Melrose Commons began to rebuild areas in the South Bronx. The IRT White Plains Road Line (No. 2 and 5) began to show an increase in riders. Chains such as Marshalls, Staples, and Target opened stores in the Bronx. More bank branches opened in the Bronx as a whole (rising from 106 in 1997 to 149 in 2007), although not primarily in poor or minority neighborhoods, while the Bronx still has fewer branches per person than other boroughs.

In 1997, the Bronx was designated an All-American City by the National Civic League, acknowledging its comeback from the decline of the mid-century. In 2006, The New York Times reported that "Construction cranes have become the borough's new visual metaphor, replacing the window decals of the 1980s in which pictures of potted plants and drawn curtains were placed in the windows of abandoned buildings." The borough has experienced substantial new building construction since 2002. Between 2002 and June 2007, 33,687 new units of housing were built or were under way and $4.8 billion has been invested in new housing. In the first six months of 2007 alone total investment in new residential development was $965 million and 5,187 residential units were scheduled to be completed. Much of the new development is springing up in formerly vacant lots across the South Bronx.

The Bronx is almost entirely situated on the North American mainland. The Hudson River separates the Bronx on the west from Alpine, Tenafly and Englewood Cliffs in Bergen County, New Jersey; the Harlem River separates it from the island of Manhattan to the southwest; the East River separates it from Queens to the southeast; and to the east, Long Island Sound separates it from Nassau County in western Long Island. Directly north of the Bronx are (from west to east) the adjoining Westchester County communities of Yonkers, Mount Vernon, Pelham Manor and New Rochelle. (There is also a short southern land boundary with Marble Hill in the Borough of Manhattan, over the filled-in former course of the Spuyten Duyvil Creek. Marble Hill's postal ZIP code, telephonic Area Code and fire service, however, are shared with the Bronx and not Manhattan.)

The Bronx River flows south from Westchester County through the borough, emptying into the East River; it is the only entirely freshwater river in New York City. A smaller river, the Hutchinson River (named after the religious leader Anne Hutchinson, killed along its banks in 1641), passes through the East Bronx and empties into Eastchester Bay.

The Bronx also includes several small islands in the East River and Long Island Sound, such as City Island and Hart Island. Rikers Island in the East River, home to the large jail complex for the entire city, is also part of the Bronx.

The Bronx's highest elevation at 280 feet (85 m) is in the northwest corner, west of Van Cortlandt Park and in the Chapel Farm area near the Riverdale Country School.[41] The opposite (southeastern) side of the Bronx has four large low peninsulas or "necks" of low-lying land that jut into the waters of the East River and were once salt marsh: Hunt's Point, Clason's Point, Screvin's Neck and Throg's Neck. Further up the coastline, Rodman's Neck lies between Pelham Bay Park in the northeast and City Island. Almost 27%, 15.4 square miles (40 km2), of the Bronx's total area is water, and the irregular shoreline extends for 75 square miles (194 km2).