Brooklyn is the most populous of New York City's five boroughs, with about 2.5 million people, and the second-largest in area. Since 1896, Brooklyn has had the same boundaries as Kings County, which is the most populous county in New York and the second-most densely populated county in the United States, after New York County (Manhattan). It is also the westernmost county of the City of New York on Long Island. Today, if it were an independent city, Brooklyn would rank as the fourth most populous city in the U.S., behind only the other boroughs of New York combined, Los Angeles, and Chicago.

Brooklyn was an independent city until January 1, 1898 when, according to the Charter of "Greater New York", Brooklyn was consolidated with the other boroughs to form the modern "City of New York". It continues to maintain a distinct culture. Many Brooklyn neighborhoods are ethnic enclaves where particular ethnic groups and cultures predominate. Brooklyn's official motto is Eendraght Maeckt Maght. Written in the (early modern spelling of the) Dutch language, it is inspired by the motto of the United Dutch Provinces (currently the official motto of Belgium) and translated "In unity, there is strength." The motto is displayed on the borough seal and flag, which also feature a young robed woman bearing fasces, a traditional emblem of Republicanism. Brooklyn's official colors are blue and gold.

The Dutch were the first Europeans to settle in the area on the western end of Long Island, also inhabited by a Native American people, the Lenape (often referred to in contemporary colonial documents by the Lenape place-name for one of the larger native settlements:"Canarsee"). The first Dutch settlements, established in 1634, were called Midwout (Midwood) and Vlacke Bos (Flatbush). The Dutch also purchased land during the 1630s from the Lenape in present-day Gowanus, Red Hook, the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and Bushwick.

The Village of Breuckelen, named for Breukelen in the province of Utrecht in the Netherlands, was authorized by the Dutch West India Company in 1646; it became the first municipality in what is now New York State. At the time, Breuckelen was part of New Netherland. Other villages were later incorporated into Brooklyn: Boswijk (Bushwick), Nieuw Utrecht (New Utrecht), and Nieuw Amersfoort (Flatlands). A few houses and cemeteries still show the Dutch origins of the borough of Brooklyn, including the oldest house of New York City, the Pieter Claesen Wyckoff House in Flatlands.

The Dutch lost Breuckelen in the British conquest of New Netherland in 1664. In 1683, the British reorganized the Province of New York into twelve counties, each of which was sub-divided into towns. Over time, the name evolved from Breuckelen, to Brockland, to Brocklin, to Brookline, to Brookland and eventually, to Brooklyn. Kings County was one of the original counties, and Brooklyn was one of the original six towns within Kings County. The county was named in honor of King Charles II.

On August 27, 1776, the Battle of Long Island (also called the Battle of Brooklyn) was fought in Kings County. It was the first major battle in the American Revolutionary War following the Declaration of Independence and the largest battle of the entire conflict. While General George Washington's defeat on the battlefield may have cast early doubts on his abilities as a military tactician and leader, he did keep the Continental Army intact with an overnight tactical retreat, across the East River.

New York became the British political and military base of operations in North America. This encouraged the departure of patriots and their sympathizers while attracting loyalist refugees fleeing the other colonies. Loyalists swelled the population of the surrounding area, including Brooklyn.

Correspondingly, the region became the focus of General Washington's intelligence activities (see Intelligence in the American Revolutionary War). The British also began to hold American patriot prisoners-of-war in rotting hulks anchored in Wallabout Bay off Brooklyn. More American prisoners died in these prison-ships than the sum of all the American battle casualties of the Revolutionary War.

The first half of the nineteenth century saw significant growth along the economically strategic East River waterfront across from New York City. Brooklyn's population expanded more than threefold between 1800 and 1820, doubled again in the 1820s, and doubled yet again during the 1830s. The county encompassed two cities: the City of Brooklyn and the City of Williamsburgh. Brooklyn annexed Williamsburgh in 1854, which lost its final "h" in the process. With the addition of this new area, Brooklyn grew from a substantial community of 36,236 to an influential city of 96,838.

The building of rail links, such as the Brighton Beach Line in 1878 heralded explosive growth, and, in the space of a decade, the City of Brooklyn annexed the towns of New Lots in 1886; Flatbush, Gravesend, and New Utrecht in 1894; and Flatlands in 1896. Brooklyn had reached its natural municipal boundaries at the Kings County line.

In 1883, the Brooklyn Bridge was completed, easing the trip to Manhattan. Brooklyn engaged in the consolidation process developing throughout the region. In 1894, Brooklyn residents voted by a slight majority to join with Manhattan, The Bronx, Queens, and Richmond (later Staten Island) to become the five boroughs of the modern New York City. This referendum took effect in 1898. Kings County retained its status as one of New York State's counties.

Founded in 1863, the Brooklyn Historical Society (BHS) is a museum, library, and educational center dedicated to preserving and encouraging the study of Brooklyn's history. BHS houses materials relating to the founding of the U.S. and the history of Brooklyn and its people.

Since consolidation with New York City in 1898, Brooklyn has been governed by the New York City Charter that provides for a "strong" mayor-council system. The centralized New York City government is responsible for public education, correctional institutions, libraries, public safety, recreational facilities, sanitation, water supply, and welfare services.

The office of Borough President was created in the consolidation of 1898 to balance centralization with local authority. Each borough president had a powerful administrative role derived from having a vote on the New York City Board of Estimate, which was responsible for creating and approving the city's budget and proposals for land use. In 1989, the Supreme Court of the United States declared the Board of Estimate unconstitutional because Brooklyn, the most populous borough, had no greater effective representation on the Board than Staten Island, the least populous borough, a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause pursuant to the high court's 1964 "one man, one vote" decision.

Since 1990 the Borough President has acted as an advocate for the borough at the mayoral agencies, the City Council, the New York state government, and corporations. Brooklyn's current Borough President is Marty Markowitz, elected as a Democrat in 2001 and re-elected in 2005, and 2009.

The Democratic Party holds the majority of public offices. As of 2005, 69.7% of registered voters in Brooklyn were Democrats. Party platforms center on affordable housing, education and economic development. The most controversial political issue is the proposed Atlantic Yards, a large housing and sports arena project. Pockets of majority Republican influence exist in Gravesend, Bensonhurst, Bay Ridge, Dyker Heights and Midwood by U.S. House Representative Michael Grimm & New York State Senator Marty Golden.

Each of the city's five counties (coterminous with each borough) has its own criminal court system and District Attorney, the chief public prosecutor who is directly elected by popular vote. Charles J. Hynes, a Democrat, has been the District Attorney of Kings County since 1989. Brooklyn has 16 City Council members, the largest number of any of the five boroughs. Brooklyn has 18 of the city's 59 community districts, each served by an unpaid Community Board with advisory powers under the city's Uniform Land Use Review Procedure. Each board has a paid district manager who acts as an interlocutor with city agencies.

Brooklyn's job market is driven by three main factors: the performance of the national and city economy, population flows and the borough's position as a convenient back office for New York's businesses.

Forty-four percent of Brooklyn's employed population, or 410,000 people, work in the borough; more than half of the borough's residents work outside its boundaries. As a result, economic conditions in Manhattan are important to the borough's jobseekers. Strong international immigration to Brooklyn generates jobs in services, retailing and construction.

In recent years, Brooklyn has benefited from a steady influx of financial back-office operations from Manhattan, the rapid growth of a high-tech and entertainment economy in DUMBO, and strong growth in support services such as accounting, personal supply agencies, and computer services firms.

Jobs in the borough have traditionally been concentrated in manufacturing, but since 1975, Brooklyn has shifted from a manufacturing-based to a service-based economy. In 2004, 215,000 Brooklyn residents worked in the services sector, while 27,500 worked in manufacturing. Although manufacturing has declined, a substantial base has remained in apparel and niche manufacturing concerns such as furniture, fabricated metals, and food products.[13] The pharmaceutical company Pfizer was founded in Brooklyn in 1869 and had a manufacturing plant in the borough for many years that once employed thousands of workers, but the plant shut down in 2008. However, new light-manufacturing centered around organic and high-end food have sprung up in the old plant.

First established as a shipbuilding facility in 1801, the Brooklyn Navy Yard employed 70,000 people at its peak during World War II and was then the largest employer in the borough. The Missouri, the ship on which the Japanese formally surrendered, was built there, as was the Maine, whose sinking off Havana led to the start of the Spanish-American War. The iron-sided Civil War vessel the Monitor was built in Greenpoint. From 1968–1979 Seatrain Shipbuilding was the major employer. Later tenants include industrial design firms, food processing businesses, artisans, and the film and television production industry. About 230 private-sector firms providing 4,000 jobs are at the Yard.

Construction and services are the fastest growing sectors. Most employers in Brooklyn are small businesses. In 2000, 91% of the approximately 38,704 business establishments in Brooklyn had fewer than 20 employees. As of August 2008, the borough's unemployment rate was 5.9%.

Brooklyn, NY is also home to many banks and credit unions. According to the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, there were 37 banks and 21 credit unions operating in Brooklyn in 2010.