Manhattan is the most densely populated of the five boroughs of New York City. The borough is coterminous with New York County, an original county of the U.S. state of New York. The borough mostly consists of Manhattan Island, bounded by the East, Hudson and Harlem Rivers, but also includes several small adjacent islands and a small area on the mainland. Manhattan has been described as the economic and cultural center of the United States and is home to the United Nations Headquarters. Wall Street in Lower Manhattan is one of the financial capitals of the world, has an estimated GDP of over $1.2 trillion, and is home of both the New York Stock Exchange and NASDAQ. Manhattan's real estate market is among the most expensive in the world, and many multinational media conglomerates are based in the borough.

New York County is the most densely populated county in the United States, denser than any individual American city. It is one of the most densely populated areas in the world, with a 2010 population of 1,585,873 living in a land area of 22.96 square miles (59.5 km2), or about 69,071 residents per square mile (26,668/km²). It is also one of the wealthiest counties in the United States, with a 2005 per capita income above $100,000. Manhattan is the third-largest of New York's five boroughs in population, after Brooklyn and Queens, and it is the smallest borough in land area.

Many districts and landmarks in Manhattan have become well known to New York City's approximately 50 million annual visitors. Times Square, iconified as "The Crossroads of the World" and "The Center of the Universe", is the brightly illuminated hub of the Broadway theatre district, one of the world's busiest pedestrian intersections, and a major center of the world's entertainment industry. The borough hosts many world-renowned bridges, skyscrapers, and parks. Manhattan's Chinatown incorporates the highest concentration of Chinese people in the Western Hemisphere. The Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village served as the catalyst for the modern gay rights movement. Numerous colleges and universities are located in Manhattan, including Columbia University, New York University, and Rockefeller University, which have been ranked among the top 50 in the world. The city of New York was founded at the southern tip of Manhattan, and the borough houses New York City Hall, the seat of city government.

The name Manhattan derives from the word Manna-hata, as written in the 1609 logbook of Robert Juet, an officer on Henry Hudson's yacht Halve Maen (Half Moon). A 1610 map depicts the name as Manna-hata, twice, on both the west and east sides of the Mauritius River (later named the Hudson River). The word "Manhattan" has been translated as "island of many hills" from the Lenape language.

New York County is one of seven counties in the United States to share the same name as the state in which they are located. The others are Arkansas, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Oklahoma, and Utah counties.

The United States Postal Service prefers that mail addressed to Manhattan use "New York, NY" rather than "Manhattan, NY".

The area that is now Manhattan was long inhabited by the Lenape Native Americans. In 1524, Florentine explorer Giovanni da Verrazzano – sailing in service of the French king Francis I – was the first European to visit the area that would become New York City. He entered The Narrows aboard his ship La Dauphine and named the land around Upper New York Harbor "Angouleme", the family name of Francis I; he sailed far enough into the harbor to sight the Hudson River which he referred to in his report to the French king as a "Very Big River"; and he named Upper New York Bay the Bay of Santa Margarita – after Marguerite de Navarre – the elder sister of the king.

It was not until the voyage of Henry Hudson, an Englishman who worked for the Dutch East India Company, that the area was mapped. Hudson came across Manhattan Island and the native people living there in 1609, and continued up the river that would later bear his name, the Hudson River, until he arrived at the site of present day Albany.

A permanent European presence in New Netherland began in 1624 with the founding of a Dutch fur trading settlement on Governors Island. In 1625, construction was started on a citadel and a Fort Amsterdam on Manhattan Island, later called New Amsterdam (Nieuw Amsterdam). Manhattan Island was chosen as the site of Fort Amsterdam, a citadel for the protection of the new arrivals; its 1625 establishment is recognized as the birth date of New York City. According to the document by Pieter Janszoon Schagen our people (ons Volck), Peter Minuit and Dutch colonists acquired Manhattan in 1626 from unnamed American Indian people in exchange for trade goods worth 60 guilders, often said to be worth 24 US$, though (by comparing the price of bread and other goods) it actually amounts to around $1,000 in modern currency (calculation by the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam).

In 1647, Peter Stuyvesant was appointed as the last Dutch Director General of the colony. New Amsterdam was formally incorporated as a city on February 2, 1653. In 1664, the English conquered New Netherland and renamed it "New York" after the English Duke of York and Albany, the future King James II. The Dutch under Director General Stuyvesant successfully negotiated with the English to produce 24 articles of provisional transfer that sought to retain for the extant citizens of New Netherlands their previously attained liberties, including freedom of religion, under new colonial English rulers.

The Dutch Republic regained it in August 1673 with a fleet of 21 ships, renaming the city "New Orange". New Netherland was ceded permanently to the English in November 1674 through the Treaty of Westminster, in exchange for Run Island which was the long-coveted last link in the Dutch nutmeg trading monopoly in Indonesia.

A prelude to organized colonial opposition to British rule, the Stamp Act Congress of representatives from across the Thirteen Colonies was held in New York City in 1765. The Congress resulted in the Declaration of Rights and Grievances, the first document by a representative body of multiple colonies to assert the concept popularly known as "no taxation without representation". It was also the first time the colonies cooperated for a unified political aim, laying the foundation for the Continental Congresses that followed years later.

The Sons of Liberty developed on Manhattan in the days following the Stamp Act protests. The organization participated in a long-term confrontation with British authorities over liberty poles that were alternately raised by the Sons of Liberty and cut down by British authorities. The skirmishes ended when the revolutionary New York Provincial Congress took power in 1775.

Manhattan was at the heart of the New York Campaign, a series of major battles in the early American Revolutionary War. The Continental Army was forced to abandon Manhattan after the disastrous Battle of Fort Washington on November 16, 1776. The city became the British political and military center of operations in North America for the remainder of the war. Manhattan was greatly damaged by the Great Fire of New York during the British military rule that followed. British occupation lasted until November 25, 1783, when George Washington returned to Manhattan, as the last British forces left the city.

From January 11, 1785, to the fall of 1788, New York City was the fifth of five capitals under the Articles of Confederation, with the Continental Congress meeting at New York City Hall (then at Fraunces Tavern). New York was the first capital under the newly enacted Constitution of the United States, from March 4, 1789, to August 12, 1790, at Federal Hall. The United States Supreme Court sat for the first time, the United States Bill of Rights were drafted and ratified, and the first steps of adding states to the Union with the passage of the Northwest Ordinance all took place there.

New York grew as an economic center, first as a result of Alexander Hamilton's policies and practices as the first Secretary of the Treasury and, later, with the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, which connected the Atlantic port to the vast agricultural markets of the Midwestern United States and Canada.

Tammany Hall, a Democratic Party political machine, began to grow in influence with the support of many of the immigrant Irish, culminating in the election of the first Tammany mayor, Fernando Wood, in 1854. Tammany Hall dominated local politics for decades. Central Park, which opened to the public in 1858, became the first landscaped park in an American city and the nation's first public park.

During the American Civil War, New York City likely had the most complex relationship to the war, of any northern city, which did not border a southern city. The city's strong commercial ties to the American South, its growing immigrant population (prior to then largely from Germany and Ireland; beginning in the late 1850's waves of Italian; and Central, and Eastern European Jews began flowing in en-masse), anger about conscription sizzled and resentment at those who could afford to pay $300 to avoid service, led to resentment against Lincoln's war policies, plus the racial element, fomented paranoia about free Blacks taking the poor immigrant's jobs, culminated in the three-day long New York Draft Riots of July 1863. These intense war-time riots are counted among the worst incidents of civil disorder in American history, with an estimated 119 participants and passersby massacred.

The rate of immigration from Europe grew steeply after the Civil War, and New York became the first stop for millions seeking a new life in the United States, a role acknowledged by the dedication of the Statue of Liberty on October 28, 1886, a gift from the people of France. The new European immigration brought further social upheaval. In a city of tenements packed with poorly paid laborers from dozens of nations, the city was a hotbed of revolution (including Anarchists and Communists among others), syndicalism, racketeering, and unionization.

In 1883, the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge established a road connection across the East River. In 1874, the western portion of the present Bronx County was transferred to New York County from Westchester County, and in 1895 the remainder of the present Bronx County was annexed. In 1898, when New York City consolidated with three neighboring counties to form "the City of Greater New York", Manhattan and the Queens, though still one county, were established as two separate boroughs. On January 1, 1914, the New York state legislature created Bronx County, and New York County was reduced to its present boundaries.

The construction of the New York City Subway, which opened in 1904, helped bind the new city together, as did additional bridges to Brooklyn. In the 1920s, Manhattan experienced large arrivals of African-Americans as part of the Great Migration from the southern United States, and the Harlem Renaissance, part of a larger boom time in the Prohibition era that included new skyscrapers competing for the skyline. New York City became the most populous city in the world in 1925, overtaking London, which had reigned for a century.

On March 25, 1911, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in Greenwich Village killed 146 garment workers. The disaster eventually led to overhauls of the city's fire department, building codes, and workplace regulations.

The period between the World Wars saw the election of reformist mayor Fiorello La Guardia and the fall of Tammany Hall after 80 years of political dominance. As the city's demographics stabilized, labor unionization brought new protections and affluence to the working class, the city's government and infrastructure underwent a dramatic overhaul under La Guardia. Despite the Great Depression, some of the world's tallest skyscrapers were completed in Manhattan during the 1930s, including numerous Art Deco masterpieces that are still part of the city's skyline today, most notably the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, and the GE Building.

Returning World War II veterans created a postwar economic boom, which led to the development of huge housing developments targeted at returning veterans, including Peter Cooper Village-Stuyvesant Town, which opened in 1947. In 1951, the UN relocated from its first headquarters in Queens, to the East Side of Manhattan.

Like many major U.S. cities, New York suffered race riots and population and industrial decline in the 1960s. By the 1970s, the city had gained a reputation as a graffiti-covered, crime-ridden relic of history. In 1975, the city government faced imminent bankruptcy, and its appeals for assistance were initially rejected, summarized by the classic October 30, 1975 New York Daily News headline as "Ford to City: Drop Dead". The fate was avoided through a federal loan and debt restructuring, and the city was forced to accept increased financial scrutiny by New York State.

The 1980s saw a rebirth of Wall Street, and the city reclaimed its role at the center of the worldwide financial industry. The 1980s also saw Manhattan at the heart of the AIDS crisis, with Greenwich Village at its epicenter. The organizations Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) and AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) were founded to advocate on behalf of those stricken with the disease. Manhattan's most populous ethnic group, white, declined from 83.5% in 1940 to 58.3% by 1990.

Starting in the 1990s, crime rates dropped drastically, with murder rates that had reached 2,245 in 1990 plummeting to 537 by 2008, and the crack epidemic and its associated drug-related violence under greater control. The outflow of population turned around, as the city once again became the destination of immigrants from around the world, joining with low interest rates and Wall Street bonuses to fuel the growth of the real estate market.