



Background Information - Setting the Stage

*We realize the manner in which a teacher interprets information to his/her students may vary from school to school. Different textbooks may emphasis certain facts and information to varying degrees and in different ways. Teacher experiences and interests may be quite different. School resources may differ and school systems may simply have different goals in mind for their students. We respect these differences. For this reason we have not presented a specific set of **facts** that **must** be learned through this curriculum. Rather we offer some basic information that should serve as a jumping off point or a common point of reference for those using the curriculum. The activities that follow and make up this curriculum are offered to embellish this basic information, under your tutelage. The activities offer suggested ways for you to add to you students' experiences with and understanding of this basic information in your classroom, in your community and when you visit New York City and the NY SKYRIDE.*

Here is the very basic information that is to be embellished via the activities of this curriculum:

The Native Americans, who called themselves the Lenape, originally inhabited the land that is now Manhattan. In the early 1600's the Dutch of the Dutch West India Company were the first Europeans to arrive and stay. They called this area New Amsterdam. They had sent Henry Hudson to find a shorter route to China but when he found none they had to settle for a settlement in the Hudson River near Albany and another on an island near the mouth of the river. The area had a wonderful, deep, natural harbor and they saw its value for trading. Next the English arrived and shortly thereafter took control. They renamed the island New York. It was a time of discovery all over the world. The Dutch were soon forced out. The British stayed and the city grew.

From 1785 to 1790 New York was the Capitol of the United States. At this time most of the settlement in the city was centered near the harbor on the lower end of the island. This is where the commerce took place and City Hall was located. The price of land was high because everyone wanted to be close to the political and economic center of things. The organization of the city here was chaotic and uncontrolled with streets running *as they pleased* with no particular order to them. Some residents had begun to move north on the island so there were a few farms dotting the landscape. New York has a wonderful, deep, natural harbor which attracted many groups of people.

In 1811, with most of the settlement still in the lower part of the island, a New York Commission put forth a grand plan for the more northern, less inhabited part of the island. Their plan called upon city officials to have a vision for what was possible here for which there was really no indication of reality. It required a huge leap of faith. They were asked to just believe it could happen. The Commission proposed the creation of a large grid with thousands of equal-sized blocks side by side, over the entire area. It would have streets leading down to the lower section of the city to its harbor. Buildings here would be lined up next to one another and would be equal in appearance. This would make them easy

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to sell. They made no provisions for recreational areas or parkland/green space. The lower part of city was not included in this grid plan. It was allowed to keep its haphazard appearance with its unorganized, narrow streets.

Also put forth was a plan to create a canal over 300 miles long that would connect New York City (via the Hudson River) to the then western interior of the nation (and to the Great Lakes). The canal was a success and New York became the point at which goods from around the world found their way into the heartland of the United States and goods likewise found their way out to the rest of the world. New York boomed!

In the middle of the 19th century immigrants from Europe --- Germany, Poland, Italy --- flooded into New York City to take advantage of this economic boom. In 1910 one out of ten New Yorkers was foreign born. These immigrants brought a rich heritage of language, religion, food and traditions creating a rich and vibrant city! But their arrival also brought with it many problems. Soon there were so many people that there was a real shortage of land. Prices rose as the amount of available land decreased making it even harder for the immigrants to afford living quarters. The immigrants were poor, often didn't speak English and were forced to live in very poor, very crowded housing conditions. As the city moved northward it left the poorest immigrants behind. Slums became a big problem. Providing basic services --- running water and electricity --- became a big problem. Safety and healthy living were almost impossible to insure.

The last half of the 19th Century saw the introduction of the department store as a new concept for shopping and the subway as a new means of transportation. Both enabled New Yorkers to expand where they lived and how they lived.

In 1916 New York City became the first city in the nation to apply zoning laws to an entire city. It divided the city into zoning districts so that needed services could be delivered to residents within these districts and set forth regulations so that neighboring buildings could not be used for conflicting functions (i.e. a slaughter house could not be located next to a hospital). It also set forth laws dictating the size, height and shape of buildings that could be built in these districts.

As the city continued to move northward, it also began to move upward. Steel had been invented which allowed for bigger and taller buildings to be built. Steel frames could carry the weight of these very tall buildings. To go taller yet --- Elisha Otis designed a safety device for elevators that would prevent them from falling to the bottom if their cables broke.

By 1920 WWI had ended and had left the United States in good economic condition. Jobs were plentiful so more immigrants arrived to take advantage of the opportunities to work and make better life for their families. More people still! People who could afford it began moving northward --- New York is an island so where were they to go? Land was at a premium. Businesses and people needed buildings. The city responded to this need by creating taller and taller skyscrapers.

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In 1929 the Empire State Building was built and became the tallest building in the world. It took one year and 45 days to build and was built under budget. It stands 86 floors high with a tower on top that brings the total height to 102 floors --- 1,250 feet. It took 7 million man hours to build. It was a building feat that has not been matched even today. The design of the Empire State Building is Art Deco. Perhaps the most amazing feat was the incredible teamwork, planning and coordination that went into the construction efforts. Without this teamwork the Empire State Building could not have been built. Adhering to the zoning laws of 1916 the Empire State Building and many of its neighbors were built with a set-back design to allow sunlight and air to reach the lower buildings around them.

In 1961 the city zoning laws were changed again. The setback requirements of the 1916 zoning laws were abandoned. New building materials and new engineering and design techniques allowed for taller, more open, even glassed buildings that would allow for light to reach the lower floors and the ground below.

Zoning laws are changing again, today, as we're writing this curriculum. So too are ideas about old buildings and green spaces and what makes a city truly livable. Today New York as well as the city where your school is located must focus on better understanding the need for and taking care of its infrastructure --- it's streets, bridges, transportation systems, signage, food and water supplies, etc.