New York City:

In 1800, New York City was the financial capital of the United States. The deep channels of its harbor made it the leading port of entry in the young nation. Manhattan boasted more banks and insurance firms than any other city. During the decade prior to 1800, the number of merchants quadrupled to more than 1,100. New York became the nexus of the cotton trade, brokering sales of raw cotton for finished goods from Britain. And its stock exchange, established just eight years before, was the first in the nation.

As the city prospered, it drew in waves of immigration, which reinforced its success. Irish immigrants were flooding into the city, fleeing the disastrous rebellion of 1798. Duncan Phyfe, born in Scotland, became the leading furniture-maker in the country, his name a synonym for refinement. The Lorillard brothers, sons of a French Huguenot, started the largest tobacco manufactory in America. John Jacob Astor, born near Heidelberg, amassed a small fortune in furs, and then made it into a great one in the China trade. Many of the immigrants pushed on into the interior of the state, settling on farmsteads that helped to supply the growing city.

The political tides within New York were shifting. Alexander Hamilton and the Federalists, who had been buoyed by a simmering conflict with France, found their political fortunes sinking when a peaceful resolution was secured. The new immigrants and the workingmen of the city tended to support their Francophilic rivals, the Democratic-Republicans. In the election of 1800, Aaron Burr engineered a stunning victory, and a wave of Democratic-Republican candidates swept into power. One of them was a young state senator named DeWitt Clinton, who would use the new majority to secure a crucial state office, a stepping stone on his way to the governor’s mansion.

The Shape of the City:

Before 1800, the entire city of more than 60,000 was largely confined below Chambers Street. The familiar grid would not be introduced for another decade. But the booming commercial life of the city was placing new demands on the limited space. Individual merchants, unable to handle the rapidly expanding business on their own, banded together in partnerships benefiting from economies of scale. They erected massive warehouses of brick, standing several stories tall and running back dozens of feet from the street. Old townhouses were subdivided into office space. In 1798 the city began the construction of South Street, which ran directly along the eastern edge of the island. It was rapidly lined with new buildings, and soon bristled with wharves and piers extending out into the river. Further up the shore, the shipbuilding business found a new home.

Much of the city, however, remained fairly squalid, a state of affairs to which many New Yorkers seemed resigned. The unpaved streets were not infrequently adorned with rotting animal carcasses and pools of stagnant water. A deadly yellow fever epidemic in 1798, though, stirred the city to action, and for the first time, it took strong measures to provide for public health. A sanitary code was passed by the state legislature, and a company was chartered to bring fresh water into the city. The city also created a Street Commission,
and equipped it with carts to haul dirt, manure, and carcasses from the streets, supplementing the efforts of the hogs that had previously performed this role.