New York City

In 1875, New York was a city of immigrants. There were more than a million people squeezed into the burgeoning metropolis, making it the largest city in the Western Hemisphere. Some forty percent of the people of the city had been born abroad, and many more had foreign-born parents. The largest group of immigrants was the Irish, who had fled the famines that repeatedly wracked their native isle after 1845. Now, three decades after they had first arrived, they were emerging as the dominant force within the city. Also arriving in large numbers were Germans, and immigrants from Great Britain. The city had also grown to include more than just Manhattan. It had annexed a chunk of the Bronx the previous year, including the towns of Kinsbridge, Morrisania, and West Farms.

The Mayor of New York City in 1875 was William H. Wickham, but the most important political figure was “Honest” John Kelly. He had taken control of Tammany Hall, the most important Democratic political club in the city, after the newspapers had exposed the corruption of his predecessor, William “Boss” Tweed. Kelly transformed Tammany into a disciplined political machine, and a bastion of Irish-American power. During his reign, the organization kept a tight grip on elective and appointive office, occasionally allowing Jews or Germans to attain office, but almost entirely excluding Italians and African-Americans.

Lower Manhattan

Across the East River, the City of Brooklyn was becoming a massive manufacturing center. Efforts were underway to bridge the gap between the two cities; the Brooklyn Bridge would be completed the following year. City workers were busy laying out macadamized roads, and speculative housing sprang up on either side of the broad, paved avenues. Rapid transit had come to the city, with the New York Elevated Railway Company on the West Side of the island supplementing the existing New York and Harlem line on the East Side. Both were intended to bring commuters from their homes, down to their jobs in Lower Manhattan.

And more people than ever before had jobs at the tip of the island. Corporate law firms multiplied, and the railroads and telegraphs turned New York into a financial capital. Lower Manhattan thrived on density. In 1870, the seven-and-a-half story Equitable Life Building was the first to use a “steam and drum” elevator, which made taller buildings profitable, and the city soon pushed up toward the sky. Cornelius Vanderbilt, the railroad tycoon, constructed a three-story freight depot on the West side of the island. Around it sprouted warehouses, and the area soon rivaled its older cousin, South Street Seaport. The explosive growth pushed fashionable retailers north, along Broadway and Sixth Avenue.

Still, all was not well in Lower Manhattan. The streets were choked with traffic, and strewn with rotting garbage. At the bottom of the island they twisted and turned in an irrational fashion, and further up the grid lacked adequate east-west arteries. Corruption was rampant, and the poorly constructed docks were literally rotting away. The
congestion, corruption, and corrosion combined to drive shippers toward Brooklyn’s comparatively modern facilities. Manhattan’s status as the leading port in New York was slowly slipping away.