

Megalopolis

In 1961, the French geographer Jean Gottmann coined the term “Megalopolis” to describe the densely populated urban corridor of the northeastern United States. In coining the term “Megalopolis,” Gottmann was referring to the fact that the five major cities that comprise Megalopolis—Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington—have expanded so much that they have, in effect, become a single, very large metropolitan area.

Relative to other regions of North America, Megalopolis is fairly small. The entire region, which extends from Maine to Virginia, includes only about fifty thousand square miles—an area smaller than Illinois. Yet the region contains the greatest concentration of wealth and power in the history of the world. For more than two hundred years, the cities of the Northeast have comprised the economic and political core of North America. This relatively small area contains the continent’s largest and densest population, its largest and most important centers of financial and governmental power, and its greatest concentrations of wealth.

Why did Megalopolis emerge very early as the political-economic core of North America? Much of the region was part of the Middle Atlantic colonies during Colonial times. The Middle Atlantic colonies had numerous geographical advantages over eastern Canada, New England and the South. These advantages included fine harbors, favorable opportunities for land transportation, agricultural prosperity, and a central location relative to the other British colonies in North America. Well before the American Revolution, commercial and political leaders in the Middle Atlantic colonies took advantage of these favorable conditions and established cities that would emerge as the economic core of the United States after independence. During the nineteenth century, Megalopolis became an important industrial area. Today, it is one of the leading centers of post-industrial economic activity in the United States and indeed throughout the world.

Another hallmark of the Northeastern corridor has been its ethnic and cultural diversity. Even in Colonial times, the Middle Atlantic region was characterized by far more diversity than any other part of North America.

The Atlantic Periphery and Quebec were settled very early in Euro-American history. In contrast, the region between the Hudson and Potomac Rivers—the area we now know as Megalopolis—was settled by Europeans somewhat later. Once the area was settled, however, it quickly attracted a large and diverse population.

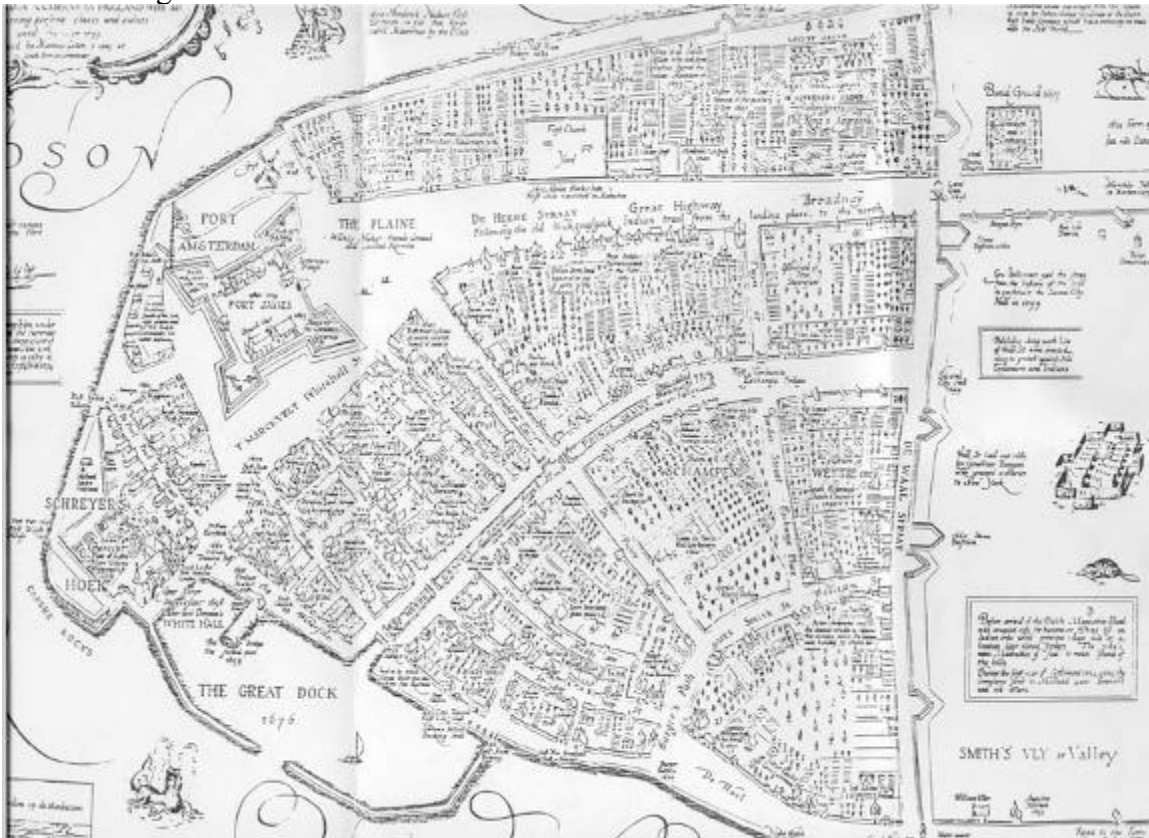
Prior to European colonization, the area now comprising Megalopolis was inhabited by a variety of Native American groups that belonged to the Eastern Woodland culture complex. Most spoke languages related to those of the Iroquois of upstate New York or the Algonquin of the eastern Great Lakes. Many subsisted through a combination of agriculture and hunting and gathering. Women typically cultivated beans, corn, squash, and other plants while men hunted deer and other game animals. Many of the original forests were cut down by Native Americans, who removed trees in order to clear land for farming and to harvest timber for fuel, constructing houses, and making bows and arrows, tomahawks, and other artifacts.



A Region called Megalopolis

Thus the landscape of present-day Megalopolis had already been modified well before the arrival of the Europeans, who modified the original landscape far more dramatically. Although most of the original inhabitants of the region were killed or driven away with the encroachment of settlement, the names of several cultures live on in names of communities and natural features such as the Susquehanna and Potomac Rivers and Narragansett and Chesapeake Bays.

Among the first permanent European residents of present-day Megalopolis were Dutch fur traders, who established Fort Nassau at the site of today's city of Albany, New York. The Fort Nassau site was at the head of navigation on the Hudson, meaning that it was as far upstream as ocean-going ships could travel. Thus it was an ideal location for a new settlement dependent on resource extraction and trade. The Dutch traded with Iroquois fur hunters and traders who had access to the riches of the "West" on the other side of the Appalachian Mountains by way of the Mohawk Gap. Building on their success, a few years later, in 1625, the Dutch constructed a second fort on the southern tip of Manhattan Island. This settlement, which they called New Amsterdam, became a walled, feudal-looking, and multicultural city of about 800 people over the course of the next thirty years or so. Nearby Dutch settlements were named Bronck's, Breuckelen, and Harlem – place names that linger today as the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Harlem. Other Dutch settlers established farms along the banks of the Hudson, including the home of President Franklin D. Roosevelt whose first paternal ancestor in North America was a Dutch immigrant.



New Amsterdam on Manhattan Island

Source: <http://genealogypages.org/maps/map1660.jpg>

These Dutch settlers' neighbors to the northeast were English settlers who were busily engaged in establishing new farms and small towns in New England. The "Pilgrims" of southeastern Massachusetts were religious dissenters who moved across the Atlantic in 1620 after several years of exile in the Netherlands. They established Plymouth Colony, which included what is now southeastern Massachusetts including Cape Cod. In the 1630s, a much larger group of English Puritans moved from southeastern England to Massachusetts. These Puritans founded the city of Boston and

established settlements throughout central and southern New England. In 1691, the Plymouth Colony was absorbed into Massachusetts.

To the southeast of the Dutch settlers of present-day New York were Swedes, who set up a colony under the guidance of Peter Minuit, the man who had originally bought Manhattan from the Native Americans. By the 1660s, the Swedes, assisted by larger numbers of Finns, had built two forts on land along the Delaware River. However, by the 1660s, trouble with the English broke out over trading rights up the Hudson, which ultimately led to the capture of both Dutch forts by the English settlers. After taking possession of New Amsterdam, the English changed the community's name to New York in honor of the English King's brother, the Duke of York.

To the southeast, the English Quaker leader William Penn was given lands along the Delaware River as repayment for a debt. His territory became the main focus for the settlement of English, Welsh, and German immigrants. More than 10,000 new immigrants arrived in a four-year period in the late seventeenth century. Only about eighteen years after it began, this colony had at least 18,000 residents. Penn's policies were quite radical by the standards of the day. He set up liberal immigration and settlement policies and actively recruited people to come from different parts of Western Europe by advertising in German-language publications in Europe. This encouraged Germans to settle in a large area extending from Philadelphia to Lancaster and German Baptists, Moravians, and Mennonites to settle on the fertile farmland along the Delaware Valley. These early Pennsylvanians were soon joined by Scots, Irish, Welsh and English farmers.

Penn's town planning innovations also made this place different from other parts of the Middle Atlantic and New England regions. With the help of a fertile agricultural hinterland, and the productivity of hard working and entrepreneurial residents, the city of Philadelphia soon grew into the largest and most cosmopolitan urban place in the colonies. Nearby southeastern Pennsylvania soon emerged as the nation's breadbasket. Maryland, meanwhile, was settled by English Catholics who, like the Quakers in Pennsylvania and the Puritans of New England, were often eager to escape religious persecution in the British Isles. Like Pennsylvania, Maryland welcomed settlers of all religious faiths.

The diversity of population in what would become Megalopolis increased steadily during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and continued after the U.S. achieved independence. English, Irish, Welsh, Scots, and German immigrants dominated foreign-born migration flows into this North American region. During the 1830s and 1840s, in fact, millions of new residents migrated here with more than seventy percent coming from just two places of origin: England and Germany. By the late nineteenth century, immigrants from southern and eastern Europe joined these earlier arrivals. Families and individuals from Poland, Russia, Scandinavia, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire along with tens of thousands of others from Italy, Greece, and other parts of the Mediterranean survived the long ocean voyage and passed through the immigration processing center on Ellis Island. Some moved on quickly after arrival to seek employment in the mines and factories of central and western Pennsylvania or the Great Lakes states.

Other new immigrants stayed in the Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore metropolitan areas fueling new population growth and adding to the economic potential and cultural richness of the region. Massive immigration into this part of North

America continued steadily until the outbreak of World War I and soon thereafter, the passage of restrictive immigration laws in the 1920s. These laws limited the numbers of new foreign-born immigrants in the U.S. according to a strict quota system. However, flows of African-Americans from the American South soon replaced the flows of foreign-born immigrants. After the 1960s, millions of immigrants and refugees born in Latin America, Asia, and Africa have settled in Megalopolis.

Since Colonial days, the focus of Megalopolis has been its major cities. Four of these--Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore were established as port cities. At the time of independence, these were four of the five largest cities in the United States (the other was Charleston, South Carolina, which was also a port city). Washington, in contrast, was not founded until after the United States became independent and it was built specifically as a government center.

Why was the development of Megalopolis focused so heavily on port cities? The British and other European colonial powers established colonies in part in order to extract resources for transformation into finished products. The colonies of the present-day Middle Atlantic region had abundant quantities of resources including fish, timber, furs, and agricultural land. These resources, along with products made from processing them, were shipped to Europe. Trade was carried out through port cities were instrumental in promoting trade between the colonies and England. As we have seen, the Northeast is a well-watered region with many large rivers flowing from the interior to the coast. Not surprisingly, port cities were developed along most of the major rivers of the region.. Indeed, each of the major cities became the economic center of its surrounding colony, with Boston, Providence, New Haven, New York, Trenton, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Richmond playing this role for the colonies of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia respectively.

The first U.S. census, taken in 1790, reveals the importance of port cities to the economy of the fledgling United States. All of the ten largest cities in the United States in 1790 were port cities. Some including New York, Philadelphia, and Boston remain major cities today; others such as New Haven and New Bedford have been eclipsed in size and importance.

Once the United States became independent, Americans began to pay more attention to the development of the interior. Even before independence, many American colonists ignored the Proclamation of 1763 and began to settle west of the crest of the Appalachians. The westward movement accelerated after independence, especially after the Louisiana Purchase secured New Orleans and the Mississippi for American shipping.

The settlement of the interior proved critical to the emergence of New York as the dominant economic center of the United States. In 1790, Philadelphia with 28,500 people was more than two-thirds the size of New York City. Some thought that Philadelphia's more central location and its selection as the temporary capital of the United States would allow Philadelphia to rival, or perhaps even surpass, New York in size and economic importance. However, physical geography played a crucial role in New York's rise to predominance. A glance at the map of the physical geography of the Northeast shows that New York, unlike Philadelphia or Boston, is blessed by easy access to the Great Lakes and other interior locations along the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers. New York financiers recognized this locational advantage and were quick to provide funds to construct the Erie Canal along the Mohawk River valley. These advantages

were reinforced after railroads came into common use, as the Mohawk River valley also became the site of the New York Central Railroad. Access to the interior from Philadelphia, in contrast, was blocked by the rugged Appalachians, which were much more difficult and expensive to traverse. Thus New York combined the advantage of a fine harbor and easy access to foreign countries with ready access to the North American interior. By 1850, New York had more than twice as many people as Philadelphia and Boston combined, and it had consolidated its position as the country's dominant city—a position which it has held ever since.

The newly independent United States also had to address the question of where to locate a permanent capital city. Philadelphia, which was the site of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, had been selected as the capital temporarily, for a ten-year period between 1790 and 1800. However, leaders of the new government, particularly those from outside the Northeast, did not want Philadelphia, New York, or other established financial centers to become seats of political power as well. Thus the First Congress in 1789-90 devoted considerable attention to identifying a capital city that would be separate geographically from these seats of financial power.

Eventually, Congress decided between locating the city along the Delaware, Susquehanna, or Potomac Rivers. Northern representatives preferred the two northern alternatives, whereas those from the South argued for the Potomac. Eventually, the North agreed to allow the Federal government to assume the states' war debts, which were greater in the South than the North, in exchange for the more southerly location. The states of Maryland and Virginia ceded 100 square miles of land to the Federal government, and the capital city of Washington was soon constructed. In 1843, however, the government decided that it did not need the Virginia portion of the District of Columbia and returned this land, which contains the present-day city of Arlington, to Virginia.

Industrialization and Deindustrialization in the Northeast

Independence and the settlement of the interior coincided with the Industrial Revolution, and the cities of the Northeast were well positioned to take advantage of the opportunity to industrialize. The Northeastern corridor had several geographical advantages that encouraged industrial development in the nineteenth century. As we have seen, many Northeastern cities were ports, facilitating international trade. As well, many had developed access to raw materials and markets in the interior. This accessibility was reinforced after the railroad came into common use, as cities such as New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore became the eastern termini of railroads connecting the East Coast with the Great Lakes and the Corn Belt. The Northeast also had abundant water power, especially along the **Fall Line**, which as we have seen represents the zone of transition between the Atlantic coastal plain and the Piedmont, and also represents the head of navigation of many eastern rivers. Most of the major cities of the Northeast and other major industrial centers such as New York, Trenton, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, and Richmond are located along the Fall Line.

The Northeast also had the country's largest concentration of capital to finance industrial development. Moreover, the densely populated region contained an ample supply of labor, which was augmented by the arrival of large numbers of European immigrants. Not surprisingly, the Northeast along with the nearby cities of the Great Lakes soon became North America's preeminent industrial center and one of the major

industrial regions of the world. After World War II, of course, heavy industry began to decline. More efficient and technologically advanced production processes reduced the need for industrial labor, and many firms took advantage of the opportunity to hire cheaper labor and relocated to the South and West, or to other countries. However, the deindustrialization of the Northeastern states had less of an effect on the population and economies of the Northeast than was the case in cities such as St. Louis, Cleveland, or Detroit.

The shift from an industrial to a post-industrial economy in the twentieth century was accompanied by spectacular growth in the region's suburban population. Today, far more residents of the Northeastern corridor live in suburbs than in central cities. Suburbanization in North America dates back to the late nineteenth century, when developers began buying and constructing homes on land on and near railroads emanating outward from Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Washington, and other major cities. Trains to accommodate commuters were scheduled, and developers extolled the virtues of suburban life combining fresh air and space with easy access to downtown workplaces—indeed, the sales pitches of developers in the 1890s were not that different than those a century later. Until World War I, however, suburbanization was primarily confined to the very wealthy. After the war, and after the automobile came into common use by the middle class, the pace of suburbanization began to increase. Well-known Northeastern suburbs such as Ardmore, Pennsylvania, Greenwich, Connecticut, and Rye, New York and Bethesda, Maryland were established and grew rapidly between the two world wars.

The pace of suburbanization increased dramatically after World War II. The GI Bill of Rights included provisions that encouraged returning military veterans to purchase houses. Many had young families and wished to raise their children away from the noise, crime, and grime of the central city. During the 1930s and 1940s, few houses were built in the United States because of the Depression and World War II. Once the war was over, however, millions of returning veterans and their families now demanded low-cost housing. In response to these demands, developers built millions of suburban houses throughout the Northeastern corridor and elsewhere in North America.

The city of Levittown, New York, typifies the suburbanization of the mid-twentieth century. Levittown is located on Long Island some twenty miles east of New York City. Purchasing hundreds of acres of potato fields on Long Island, William J. Levitt mass-produced thousands of identical houses using crews of workers with highly specialized skills. A second Levittown was built outside Philadelphia beginning in 1953.

The last third of the twentieth century was characterized by two significant developments in the suburbanization of the United States. Before and shortly after World War II, the suburbs were “bedroom” communities: most residents commuted to work in central cities. By the 1970s, however, more and more people worked, as well as lived, in the suburbs. Suburban employment began to increase much more rapidly than did employment in the central city. Suburban locations were attractive to business interests for several reasons. The price of land per acre was much cheaper than in the city, and business owners could construct much larger, less expensive factories and offices in the suburbs. Suburban locations also allowed business interests to take advantage of accessibility to highways, avoiding the traffic congestion associated with narrow, crowded city streets and reducing transport costs. Suburban locations were especially

attractive to high-technology industries. By the 1980s, suburbs such as the Route 128 corridor outside Boston and the Rockville Pike corridor northwest of Washington, D. C. were well known as centers of high-tech industry.

The population of the suburbs also began diversifying rapidly. In the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s, suburbs were overwhelmingly white, with very few African-Americans and other racial minorities. Many suburbs had formal or informal codes prohibiting the sale of property to minorities. Levittown, for example, forbade the sale of houses to African-Americans until racial covenants in housing were declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1948. In the late 1960s, the Federal government enacted and began to enforce fair housing laws that prohibited discrimination in housing throughout the United States. These laws, along with increased prosperity among minority homeowners, resulted in the rapid suburbanization of African-Americans and other minorities. Many suburban jurisdictions attracted large numbers of minorities. Today a majority of residents of Prince Georges County, Maryland, east of Washington, are African-Americans. This county is the largest and most prosperous minority-dominated suburb in the United States. In recent years, Hispanics and Asian-Americans outside Washington, New York, and other major cities have also suburbanized in large numbers.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, members of ethnic groups often settled in densely packed neighborhoods whose populations were dominated by members of the same ethnic group who not only lived near one another but also tended to work, socialize, attend worship services, and participate in social activities within the neighborhood. New York's Little Italy and heavily Irish South Boston are examples of such neighborhoods. Today, however, suburbanizing members of ethnic groups maintain close personal ties without living the same immediate area—a process known as **heterolocalism** .

The suburbanization of minority populations in Megalopolis over the past few decades underscores the importance of cultural diversity as a factor in the development and maintenance of the region as an important economic, cultural, and political center. The region was the most diverse region in North America long before the American Revolution, and along with California and Texas is one of the most diverse areas of North America today in terms of ethnic and racial diversity.

Like every region in North America and elsewhere, Megalopolis has its share of problems. The cities of Megalopolis are crowded. Commuters often face massive traffic jams, and the cost of living, especially in large cities, is very high. Large numbers of people crowded into a relatively small area inevitably results in increasing levels of air and water pollution. Numerous cultural and ethnic groups inhabit the region, and tensions between ethnic groups occasionally result in violence. Of course, such problems are not unique to Megalopolis. The growth of Megalopolis has been eclipsed for several decades by even more impressive levels of economic and population growth in the Sunbelt, especially in California, Texas, and Florida. Nevertheless, Megalopolis has been the core of the North American political economy for nearly four hundred years. It is unlikely to relinquish this position at any time in the foreseeable future.