



1. Ratzer Map of New York, 1776

Bernard Ratzer, "Plan of the city of New York in North America: Surveyed in the years 1766 & 1767." Published January 12, 1776. The Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

This remarkable and beautiful map, by British army officer Bernard Ratzer, is the most accurate depiction of New York in its late colonial days. At the southern tip of Manhattan are shown the mostly jumbled, narrow, crooked streets of Dutch and English New York; the city itself is still not much more than a toehold on a large island surrounded by substantial rivers. Above the triangular Commons (now City Hall Park) appear only the faintest beginnings of a city extending north into the countryside. Both in the colonial town and beyond, Ratzer captures the island's varied topography: hills and valleys; meadows, cultivated fields, and woods; ponds, streams, and swamps; and

roads radiating northward along routes that started, in many cases, as native pathways.

But the beginnings of order, not imposed by city plan but conceived by private owners, are evident. In the widening wedge between Broadway and the Hudson River is a neighborhood of rectangular blocks around King's College (today's Columbia University), developed by Trinity Church in the 1750s. To the east of Bowery Lane beyond the settled town are the rectilinear blocks newly laid around De Lancey Square by the De Lancey family in the 1760s. Ratzer's plan illustrates the very human tendency to proceed from randomness to order. During the course of New York's colonial period (1624–1776) this transition began casually with neighborhood development by private owners; within a generation of the Revolution, order would become a mandate of government, imposed far beyond the settled city to the northern reaches of Manhattan Island.

Little is known about Bernard Ratzer. He began his colonial service with the British military during the French and Indian War in the 1750s. He was very busy with maps and surveys throughout British North America until the Revolution, which apparently occasioned his return to England. GK