History of New York City

Throughout the past century and a half, New York has experienced many changes. There are many different significant agents of change that have occurred and affected the region. One of the most important developments that has caused change and impacted New York in numerous ways is transportation. In addition, immigration has occurred and affected the social, cultural, political and economic landscape of New York in an enormous way. One other significant agent of change that has occurred during the past century and a half in New York is urbanization. Urbanization has caused a huge increase in population and has impacted New York in many different ways. Each of these agents of change and developments have shaped New York into what it is today.

One extremely significant agent of change and development that has occurred in New York during the past century and a half is transportation. In the mid-nineteenth century, the United States was expanding to all different regions, and transportation systems helped connect the growing nation. According to “Transportation Before 1876,” by 1830, steamboats were the main river transportation system (1). As one person described, “As farmers shifted from growing just enough to sustain their families (subsistence agriculture) to producing crops for sale (commercial agriculture), demand grew for cheaper and faster ways to get goods to market. Steamboats made river ports important commercial points for entire regions.” (Improvements in Transportation 1). Therefore, steamboats became very popular and extremely useful as a means of transportation for farmers and merchants. Around the same time as steamboats were being used often, steam railroads began to appear in the United States around 1830. Steam railroads took over the continental transportation system by the 1850’s” (Transportation before 1876 5). By 1860, there were about 31,000 miles of track in the country, mainly in the Northeast but also in the South and Midwest (Improvements in Transportation 5). At first, railroads carried mostly people, but later on they were used to move farm products and manufactured goods (Transportation Before 1876 4). Railroads became more useful than canals to transport items for many reasons. According to “Improvements in Transportation,” “They required a smaller initial capital investment; offered more direct routes; and provided fast, year-round service (rivers and canals froze in winter)” (5). The rapid service steam trains (also known as els) appeared in 1867, connecting various parts of New York City. “Although they were not at street level, the trains became essential mass transit vehicles, ferrying workers and families around the expanding city with greater ease and speed than the horse-drawn vehicles on the ground” (Thomas 2). By 1900, the els gained access to the Brooklyn Bridge, linking Fulton Street to Park Row in Manhattan. Thomas states, “In 1903, the 9th Avenue line of the elevated rapid service became the first to run on electric rather than steam power. This set the trend, and the changeover from steam happened rapidly. The Interborough Rapid Transit appeared in 1904 and became the city’s first subway. By 1909, electric trolleys replaced steam-powered cable cars in all five boroughs, which gave New York City transportation a sudden boost in speed and efficiency” (2-5). By 1973, elevated rapid service trains were no longer in use. Subways replaced the high-flying trains once and for all. Subways became the city’s only mass transit train system (Thomas 5). The developments of transportation led to easier and faster travel time for people and a more efficient way to transport goods over long distances. People could go on a train or subway and get to their destination much faster than they would by horse or any other previous form of transportation. Aside from all the benefits the transcontinental railroad has

given people, there were some negative consequences back then as well. According to Endsley, “The railroad forced Native Americans to relocate from their lands which resulted in widespread destruction of Native American cultures and ways of life. Many conflicts arose as the railroad project continued westward, and the military was brought in to fight Native American tribes. In addition, many natural resources were destroyed to make way for the expanding train tracks and stations” (2-3). However, our economy today depends on our railroad system, and it would not look the way it does now without the construction of the transcontinental railroad. From the 1800s to present day, train transport continues to shape our economic and social lives. Going from traveling by horse or mainly canals to cars, buses, trains, and subways has changed and impacted New York in a huge way.

Another significant agent of change that has occurred in New York from the mid-nineteenth century to present day is immigration. According to “Immigration and New York City,” “Between the years of 1880 and 1920, New York’s population nearly tripled. During this period- when New York was transforming from a port city to an industrial metropolis- ample employment opportunities drew in many new residents” (7). In particular, more than 630,000 immigrants settled in the city in the 1890’s, and another 670,000 came in the first decade of the twentieth century (Immigration and New York City 7). Immigrants came to New York for job opportunities and a better life for them and their families. However, in the 1920’s, things began to change dramatically. “Congress passed severe immigration restrictions- most notably the Immigration Act of 1924- effectively cutting off the supply of European workers that had fueled New York City’s economic growth. New York City attracted workers from elsewhere. African Americans migrated to the city from the rural South, causing the city’s black population to grow from 100,000 in 1910 to almost 1.7 million by 1970. Puerto Ricans also began arriving-with more than 400,000 settling in New York City in the 1950’s alone” (Immigration and New York City 7). The newcomers lived in the same neighborhoods that housed the prior wave of immigrants, who had moved on to new locations, either in boroughs other than Manhattan or in the Suburbs (Immigration and New York City 7). The 1970’s became the city’s most challenging decade. The population declined by more than ten percent and the city fell into an economic crisis that led it to request- and to be denied- federal intervention (Immigration and New York City 7). Besides the crisis, other reasons affected New York’s population decline. For example, African Americans stopped coming to New York in the mid-1960’s as conditions in the South began to improve during the Civil Rights era. Also, emigration from Puerto Rico also decreased. It went from a high point of 470,000 departures in the 1950’s to only 66,000 in the 1970s (Immigration and New York City 7). “While the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 removed the system of national origin quotas that had severely restricted immigration to the United States as a result of the Immigration Act of 1924, the reaction to this new law was too slow to offset the aging of earlier generations of immigrants” (Immigration and New York City 7). Eventually, the city’s population was revived. By 2000, New York was home to more than 8 million people, and it has continued to grow ever since. Without the resurgence of immigration to the United States in the 1980s, New York would be much less populous and prosperous than it is today (Immigration and New York City 8). Along with increasing population, immigrants also play a vital role in New York City’s economy. According to DiNapoli, “Many of New York City’s immigrants are entrepreneurs. The Partnership for a New American Economy reported in 2010 that nearly one-fifth of the Fortune 500 companies had been founded by immigrants. Many of these firms have a strong presence in New York City” (1). In addition, “Immigrants account for 43 percent of New York City’s work force and nearly one-third of the City’s economic output. They have a strong presence in a wide range of occupations and industries such as technology and finance (DiNapoli 1). Immigrants contribute to the City’s unique and ethnic diversity, which makes New

York an intercultural, fascinating and amazing city. Immigrants impact New York in so many different ways, and most immigrants come to New York eager to work hard and become successful. According to Levine, “The impact of so many relatively young people has been great. In the 1970’s, immigration pushed up the potential labor supply slightly at a time the city’s population was declining by about 1 million” (5). Immigration has had many positive affect’s on New York City throughout mid-nineteenth century to present day. Immigrants have increased New York’s population tremendously, created new companies and made advancements in technology and finance, and have led to New York becoming a diverse city.

One final important agent of change that has occurred in New York throughout mid-nineteenth century to present day is urbanization. Urbanization is the movement of populations from rural to urban areas. Urbanization occurred in the United States in the nineteenth century for numerous reasons. According to the article “U.S. History, The Growing Pains of Urbanization,” “The new technologies of that time led to a massive lead in industrialization, requiring large numbers of workers. New electric lights and powerful machinery allowed factories to run twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Workers were forced into grueling twelve-hour shifts, requiring them to live close to the factories” (1). In addition, “while the work was dangerous and difficult, many Americans were willing to leave behind the declining prospects of preindustrial agriculture in the hope of better wages in industrial labor. Furthermore, problems ranging from famine to religious persecution led to a new wave of immigrants to arrive from central, eastern, and southern Europe, many of whom settled and found work near the cities where they first arrived” (U.S. History, The Growing Pains of Urbanization 1). Therefore, attractions of city life and employment opportunities due to rapid changes in industrialization motivated people to move to urban areas. Furthermore, according to “America Moves to the City,” “Eleven million people migrated from rural to urban areas between 1870 and 1920, and a majority of the twenty-five million immigrants who came to the United States in these same years moved into the nation’s cities. By 1920, more Americans lived in cities than in rural areas for the first time in US history (1). “At the turn of the twentieth century, New York City was the national capital of finance, industry, shipping and trade, publishing, the arts, and immigration, a magnet that drew to it much of the best and most avant-garde in art and literature” (America Moves to the City 6). The Industrial Revolution of both the 19th and 20th centuries transformed and increased urban life and gave people higher expectations for improving their standard of living (A.U.C. 1). “The increased number of jobs, along with technological innovations in transportation and housing construction, encouraged migration to cities. Development of railroads, streetcars, and trolleys in the 19th century enabled city boundaries to expand. People no longer had to live within walking distance of their jobs” (A.U.C. 1). Urbanization led to a huge population increase in New York City and other urban areas, an increase in jobs, entertainment in the city, and a better life for people living in the city.

To conclude, New York has experienced many changes during the past century and a half that have impacted the region in many ways. Some of the most significant agents of change that have occurred are the development of transportation, immigration, and urbanization. From the late 1800’s to present day, transportation has evolved tremendously. People went from travelling on steam trains to subways which are more efficient and are still being used today. In addition, immigration has changed and impacted New York greatly, causing things such as population increase and an increase in labor supply. Finally, urbanization has impacted New York also by causing population increase, improving the economy, and helping to create better lifestyles for city residents.