Why is it called New York?

As you may have learned in history class, the city we call New York was originally known as New Amsterdam, after the Dutch settled the island of Manha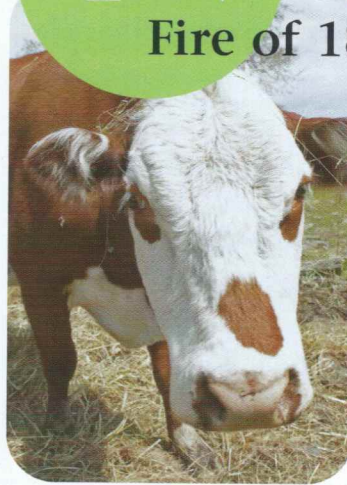ttan in 1613. The burgeoning city remained in Dutch hands until 1664, when it was conquered by the British, who promptly renamed it "New York" after the Duke of York, a prominent British nobleman. (There are still many Dutch place names in New York—for example, the borough of Brooklyn was named after the Dutch town "Breukelen.")

Until the 1800s, most of New York City remained crowded on the southern part of Manhattan; pretty much everything above 14th Street was undeveloped farmland (that's about two-thirds of the island, and all of mid-town, for those of you unfamiliar with the city). Today, New York City—which includes the island of Manhattan as well as the other four boroughs of Brooklyn, Staten Island, Queens, and the Bronx—has more than 8 million residents, making it the biggest (and most densely packed) city in the U.S.

How did the Chicago Fire of 1871 start?

Only three times in American history has a major U.S. city come close to total destruction: the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, the "Great Chicago Fire" of 1871, and Hurricane Katrina in 2005, which flooded New Orleans. For a long time, it was believed that this fire—which left 90,000 people homeless out of a total population of 300,000—was caused by a cow kicking over a lantern into a pile of hay. In 1893, though, a reporter confessed to making up this story, so the exact cause of the fire is still a mystery!

What is the biggest city in the U.S.?

There are two ways to answer this question: by population, or by total area. In terms of population, the clear winner is New York, with a whopping 8 million residents. But in terms of total area, New York isn't even close: with less than a million residents, Jacksonville, Florida, has a total area of 874 square miles, compared to about 300 square miles for New York. In other words, you couldn't walk from one end of Jacksonville to the other even if you wanted to!

How did Philadelphia get its name?

Philadelphia is one of the few U.S. cities whose name is completely made up, rather than borrowed from a famous person or Indian tribe. William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania and a strong believer in freedom and religious tolerance, named his capital city after the Greek phrase for "brotherly love." And it's a good thing, too—the Indian name for the Philadelphia region was the much less poetic-sounding "Shackamaxon."