A teddy bear or other childhood totem. That game-winning high school football. A Beatles concert ticket stub from Shea Stadium. The fraternity pin from you-know-who. A grandchild’s first tooth. Your retirement watch from work.

Imagine having to choose just one object that defined your life.

Which one would it be?

Searching for paradigmatic but quirky artifacts that define the past is an irresistible parlor game. A few years ago, the British Museum and BBC Radio compiled A History of the World in 100 Objects. When I played a local version for The New York Times, though, their 100-object cap proved too confining. Call it a conceit, but doing justice to the history of a city this big took 101.

The criteria for this kaleidoscopic History of New York in 101 Objects were not arbitrary. My choices—from an artichoke to an elevator safety brake, a public high school yearbook to a cheap handgun, a skeletal model of King Kong sans rabbit fur to a mechanical cotton picker—were highly subjective. The objects themselves had to have played some transformative role in New York City’s history or they had to be emblematic of some historic transformation. They also had to be enduring, which meant they could not be disproportionately tailored to recent memory or
contemporary nostalgia. Fifty, or even twenty-five years from now, would they seem as vital or archetypal as they do right now? “The closer you get to the now, the more objects you can think of, but their longevity is harder to get a sense of,” Dr. Jeremy D. Hill, the British Museum’s research manager, told me. “When the British public was asked to nominate objects for our list, the vast majority were only one generation old. But in two hundred years’ time, how many of these would you choose to be talking about?”

That meant leaving out lots of twenty-first-century objects—from Volume I, at least.

The British Museum and other institutions that have compiled similar lists generally limited themselves to items in their own collection. We imposed no such boundaries—only that an object could not be a human being, alive or dead (Mayor Ed Koch, who died in 2013, got the most nominations from Times readers). Nor too much bigger than a breadbox (which ruled out Central Park, the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, the Parachute Jump, Washington Square Arch, the Staten Island Ferry, and the Unisphere, among many others). The object had to have existed someplace and at some time and still survive in some form (only one in our list could not be found). Our objects could come from any place, but they had to illuminate great New York movements or great moments, personify individuals who played an outsized role in the city’s development, or typify epochal transmutations in its ongoing metamorphosis.

With those goals in mind, the 101 objects in this book were winnowed from hundreds of possibilities.

People and events shape history, but do inanimate doodads? Recently, in writing a book about Grand Central Terminal, I learned that even a single building could be transformational. Grand Central epitomized a convulsion in civil rights, communication, landmarks preservation, and urban planning—the terminal shifted Manhattan’s cultural center of gravity to its very doorstep. By weaving its way into the fabric of American culture, this majestic beaux arts monument to civic and corporate pride embodied the soul of the city and a locus of new beginnings.

Still, a building is one thing—even one located in “Skyscraper National Park,” as Kurt Vonnegut called Manhattan. Can a single object affect, much less make, history? Of course. Where would we be without the wheel, much less a crucifix or
a credit card (Brooklyn is the “Borough of Churches,” and the first bank charge card was invented there in 1946). “You can find the entire cosmos lurking in its least remarkable objects,” Wisława Szymborska, the Polish poet, wrote. This book is a biography of material things—things, some remarkable, some mundane, that eloquently objectify and illuminate history through their own unique prism. They may be inanimate, but they have taken on lives of their own.

These 101 begin before history, hundreds of millions of years ago, when geology created the physical contours that made New York a natural harbor and downtown an unshakable foundation for manmade objects, ranging from the metallic spires of soaring skyscrapers to doughy bagels dense enough to be doorstops. The bedrock amphibolite, Fordham gneiss, and Manhattan schist forged by volcanic upheavals weathered millennia. But as Neil MacGregor, the director of the British Museum, observed, “A history through objects can never itself be fully balanced because it depends entirely on what happens to survive.”

While the earliest objects are in short supply, I try to trace the First Peoples in what became New York, displaced by the early Dutch settlers, whose pragmatic tolerance for diversity distinguished the colony from English, French, and Spanish settlements (but did not rule out kidnapping and enslaving Africans). A century of British rule climaxed in seven years of largely forgotten but miserable occupation by enemy troops during the American Revolution and then a fateful, cunning political calculation to shift the new nation’s capital to a swamp in the South.

The nineteenth century witnessed gargantuan growth, fueled largely by European immigration and industrialization, which elevated New York into the nation’s manufacturing and maritime capital (and shaped its ambivalence about the Civil War) and, by the beginning of the next century, into its gilded cultural capital, too. In the twentieth, New York also became the capital of the world. As the new millennium neared, the city struggled on the brink of bankruptcy and chaos, but it survived a baptism by fire to begin the twenty-first century stronger and more vibrant than ever.

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I consulted colleagues, museum curators, librarians, historians, archivists, novelists, experts and novices, friends and total strangers for what began as a search for
fifty representative objects (constrained by the space requirements of print in *The New York Times*). Fifty wasn’t enough. In a follow-up article, I incorporated fifteen more, culling them from suggestions by hundreds of readers who weighed in.

Those objects and the dozens more in this expanded book version define us in surprising ways. They range from distinctive curios you didn’t know existed to prosaic artifacts that we take for granted but are unmasked in a different light. Valuing diversity, we encompassed the broad spectrum of human experience, perhaps at the expense sometimes of the obvious. (As Dr. Hill recalled, “There’s a limit to the number of stone axes or Buddhas one can include.”) Not all the searches were productive. One proved particularly vexing: how to illustrate a negative, the city’s dramatic decline in crime since the 1990s—an intact pane of glass to prove the broken-window theory of policing? (Suggestions welcome!)

My original goal was to be provocative. I succeeded. How, readers demanded, could I have included a MetroCard but not a subway token? What about the Spaldeen? A woman in Tokyo suggested those singular orange-and-white Con Ed steam chimneys. Why a black-and-white cookie (author’s prerogative: I crave them) but not a knish or an egg cream or a pizza slice or an artisanal microbrewed beer or a soggy hot dog purchased from a sidewalk vendor under a blue and yellow umbrella? After all, New Yorkers are what they eat. Food preoccupied people more than any other single category, leading me to suggest that Richard Castellano’s immortal words from *The Godfather* be enshrined as New York’s unofficial motto. If Chicago’s is “Where’s Mine?,” New York’s, particularly in an era of plummeting crime, deserves to be: “Leave the gun. Take the cannoli.”

We all bring predispositions to our choices and our criteria. One of mine was to be unconventional, to leave both of us—me and you, the reader—surprised by what we just learned, or inspired to suggest some even more appropriate exemplar. The goal was not to be deliberately obscure but to be revealing by whimsically heading down some less traveled avenue (or, more likely, a barely tramped footpath) toward a historical imperative.

We tend to be preoccupied by the present, with one eye cocked on the future.
But history, after all, isn’t really about the past. Our history is about who we are right now and where, as a society, we’re headed (just as an obituary isn’t about death but about a life). The goal is “effective history”—history that informs the present, that helps understand New York and how New Yorkers understand themselves.

“You could grow up in the city where history was made,” Jonathan Lethem wrote in *The Fortress of Solitude*, “and still miss it all.” Think of this, then, as a road-less-traveled guidebook to what you may have missed.

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Like the original version, even this expanded list constitutes a history of New York—not *the* history. It’s actually *my* history, an idiosyncratic exploration of New York exceptionalism by a journalist who has been covering the city for nearly fifty years and whose specialty seems to have become turning history into front-page news. I did that a few years back with the first recorded murder in New York—four hundred years ago—and with the unreported shrinking of a monumental skyscraper, by recalling the first black police officer and the restoration of a tombstone for the author of the nation’s first Yiddish cookbook.

Any definitive history, as the British Museum’s MacGregor acknowledged, would have been an “absurdly ambitious” quest. His list included the Rosetta Stone, of course. Maybe our seventeenth-century Dutch-English dictionary is comparable. But think of this entire book as a literary version of the Rosetta Stone—a template for translating, reimagining, and reinterpreting a history you thought you knew and for conjuring up other objects that were equally transcendent. This is a book for people who love New York—or love to hate it. Who can’t get enough of the things that make us New Yorkers.

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As much as this list is geocentric, it is not just a history of New York. A reader from North Carolina said he welcomed it as an antidote to “the New England–centered standard history of our country.” The diversity reflected by my original list of objects,
he wrote, implies or expresses “themes which are New York’s continuing legacy to our nation.”

Kenneth T. Jackson, the Columbia University historian, likes to say that America begins in New York. The Erie Canal not only established the city’s maritime supremacy; it exported its culture and politics. The consolidation of the city inspired similar conglomerations. Innovations originally unique to New York spread rapidly to other metropolitan areas across the country because they were too transformative to be contained in a single city of infinite possibilities, even the nation’s biggest.

“New York is to the nation what the white church spire is to the village,” E. B. White wrote, “the visible symbol of aspiration and faith, the white plume saying the way is up!”

Among the objects suggested by readers was Walt Whitman’s 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, which itself contains a fitting coda to any finite list of influential objects: “I am large,” Whitman wrote in “Song of Myself.” “I contain multitudes.”