**Independent City (United States)**

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| [**Administrative divisions of the United States**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_divisions_of_the_United_States) |
| **First level** |
| * [State](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.S._state) * [Commonwealth](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commonwealth_(U.S._insular_area)) * [Indian reservation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_reservation) * [Territories](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Territories_of_the_United_States) |
| **Second level** |
| * [County](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/County_(United_States)) * [Consolidated city–county](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consolidated_city%E2%80%93county) * [County-equivalent](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/County-equivalent) * **Independent city** |
| **Third level** |
| * [Cities, towns and villages](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_lists_of_settlements_in_the_United_States) * [Civil township](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_township) * [Consolidated city-township](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consolidated_city-township) |

In the [United States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States), an [independent city](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Independent_city) is a [city](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/City) that does not belong to any particular [county](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/County_(United_States)). Because counties have historically been a strong institution in local government in most of the United States, independent cities are relatively rare outside of [Virginia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virginia) (see below), whose [state constitution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State_constitution_(United_States)) makes them a special case. The [U.S. Census Bureau](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.S._Census_Bureau) uses counties as its base unit for presentation of statistical information, and treats independent cities as county equivalents for those purposes. [Baltimore, Maryland](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baltimore) is the largest independent city in the United States.

**Virginia**

Main articles: [List of cities in Virginia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cities_in_Virginia) and [Political subdivisions of Virginia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_subdivisions_of_Virginia)

Thirty-nine of the USA's 42 independent cities are in Virginia. The three that are not in Virginia are [Baltimore, Maryland](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baltimore); [St. Louis, Missouri](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Louis,_Missouri); and [Carson City, Nevada](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carson_City,_Nevada).

**History**

In the [Commonwealth of Virginia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commonwealth_of_Virginia), all municipalities incorporated as "cities" have also been "independent cities," also called "free cities," since 1871, when a revised state constitution took effect following the [American Civil War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Civil_War) and the loss of the area which became the separate state of [West Virginia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_Virginia). Virginia's 39 independent cities are not politically part of a county, even though geographically they may be completely surrounded by one. An independent city in Virginia may serve as the [county seat](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/County_seat) of an adjacent county, even though the city by definition is not part of that county. Some other Virginia municipalities, even though they may be more populous than some existing independent cities, are [incorporated towns](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Incorporated_town). These towns always form part of a county. Incorporated towns have limited powers, varying by each charter. They typically share many aspects such as courts and public [school divisions](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/School_division) with the county they are within.

In the Commonwealth of Virginia, there are two classes of city. The primary difference relates to the court system. A first-class city (e.g., Norfolk) has its own General District Court and its own Circuit Court. A second-class city (e.g., Fairfax City, Falls Church) has its own District Courts, but not its own Circuit Court. So, for example, Fairfax City shares a Circuit Court with Fairfax County, while Falls Church City shares a Circuit Court with adjacent Arlington County. In Virginia, a District Court is not a "court of record", so all cases are heard by a judge. In Virginia, all jury trials are heard in a Circuit Court.

Three older Virginia counties, whose origins go back to the original eight [shires of Virginia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shires_of_Virginia) formed in 1634 in the [Colony of Virginia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colony_of_Virginia), have the word *city* in their names; however, politically they are counties. The independent cities were formed to centralize trading and legal matters as the older system of merchant ships cruising from plantation to plantation was inefficient. The colonial capital of [Williamsburg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colonial_Williamsburg) was created for this reason, being a port for the James River. These cities include [Charles City County](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_City_County,_Virginia) and [James City County](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_City_County,_Virginia), whose names originated with earlier "incorporations" created in 1619 by the [Virginia Company](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virginia_Company) as [Charles Cittie](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_City_(Virginia_Company)) and [James Cittie](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_City_(Virginia_Company)). Another was [Elizabeth City County](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_City_County,_Virginia), originally part of the older [Elizabeth Cittie](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_City_(Virginia_Company)), which became extinct in 1952 when it was consolidated politically by mutual consent with the small City of Hampton, the county seat, and the [Town of Phoebus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phoebus,_Virginia) to reform and expand into the current independent city of [Hampton, Virginia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hampton,_Virginia), one of the large cities of [Hampton Roads](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hampton_Roads).

**Arlington County**

[Arlington County](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arlington_County,_Virginia), commonly referred to as just "Arlington," is not an independent city. However, it is often considered, popularly, to be a city because it is geographically small and dense; is fully urbanized; is close in size to other independent cities in the commonwealth; has no other city or town within its borders; and through a [quirk of Virginia history](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Byrd_Road_Act), maintains its own highway infrastructure like independent cities (but unlike any other Virginia county, except Henrico County). It consists solely of land ceded by Virginia to the Federal Government to form [Washington, D.C.](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Washington,_D.C.), in the late 18th century, and [retroceded](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Retrocession_(District_of_Columbia)) to Virginia in 1846 (most of this land now composes Arlington County, the rest of it forms part of the [City of Alexandria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexandria,_Virginia)).

**Former cities**

See also: [Former counties, cities, and towns of Virginia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Former_counties,_cities,_and_towns_of_Virginia)

Former independent cities now extinct that were long extant in Virginia include:

* [Clifton Forge](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clifton_Forge,_Virginia), which gave up its [city charter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/City_charter) in 2001, and is now an [incorporated town](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Incorporated_town) in [Alleghany County](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alleghany_County,_Virginia).
* [Manchester](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manchester,_Virginia), which was consolidated by mutual agreement with the [City of Richmond](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richmond,_Virginia) in 1910.
* [South Boston](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Boston,_Virginia), which gave up its city charter in 1994, and is now an [incorporated town](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Incorporated_town) in [Halifax County](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halifax_County,_Virginia).
* [South Norfolk](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Norfolk,_Virginia), which merged with [Norfolk County](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norfolk_County,_Virginia) in 1963 to form the [City of Chesapeake](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chesapeake,_Virginia).

Two other independent cities existed only for a short time:

* [Nansemond](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nansemond,_Virginia), created from the former [Nansemond County](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nansemond_County,_Virginia) in 1972, was merged in 1974 with the then-City of Suffolk and three [unincorporated towns](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unincorporated_community) within the county's former boundaries to form today's [City of Suffolk](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suffolk,_Virginia).
* [Warwick](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warwick,_Virginia), which was formed from the former [Warwick County](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warwick_County,_Virginia) in 1952, was in 1958 consolidated by mutual agreement with the newly-expanded [City of Newport News](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newport_News,_Virginia).

**Other states**

Some states have created independent cities in order to cater to the special requirements of governing their largest cities and/or capitals:

* The [City of Baltimore](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baltimore), [Maryland](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maryland), has been separate from [Baltimore County](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baltimore_County,_Maryland) since 1851.
* [Carson City](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carson_City,_Nevada), [Nevada](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nevada), consolidated with [Ormsby County](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ormsby_County,_Nevada) in 1969; however, Ormsby County was simultaneously dissolved.
* The [City of St. Louis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Louis,_Missouri), [Missouri](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Missouri), was separated from [St. Louis County](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Louis_County,_Missouri) in 1876.

**Other entities similar to independent cities**

An independent city is not the same as:

* A [consolidated city-county](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consolidated_city-county) (such as [San Francisco](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Francisco), [Philadelphia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philadelphia), [Denver](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Denver), [Honolulu](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honolulu), [Jacksonville](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacksonville,_Florida), [Indianapolis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indianapolis), [Nashville](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nashville,_Tennessee), [Louisville](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louisville,_Kentucky), [Athens](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athens,_Georgia), [Augusta](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augusta,_Georgia), [New Orleans](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Orleans), or [Anchorage](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anchorage,_Alaska)), in which the city and county (or, as in Louisiana, a parish; or as in Alaska, a borough) governments have been merged (in some cases, the city takes up all the land within the county's boundaries, while in other cases, several other independent incorporated communities exist). The town and the county of [Nantucket](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nantucket) in Massachusetts, which are coterminous, form a similar entity. Likewise for the [City and County of Honolulu](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honolulu_County,_Hawaii), which covers the entire island of [Oahu](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oahu), [Hawaii](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hawaii). The difference is that in a consolidated city-county, the city and county both nominally exist, although they have a consolidated government, whereas in an independent city, the county does not even nominally exist.
* A completely urbanized county such as [Arlington County](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arlington_County,_Virginia), [Virginia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virginia).
* A "Federated" City-County multi-tiered type of government such as applies between [Miami](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miami) and [Miami-Dade County, Florida](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miami-Dade_County,_Florida).
* The [City of New York](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_City), which is a [*sui generis*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sui_generis) jurisdiction: the city is made up of five [boroughs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Borough), each of which is territorially coterminous with a county of New York State.
* [Washington, D.C.](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Washington,_D.C.), which has a special status as the U.S. capital. It is not part of any [state](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.S._state); instead the [District of Columbia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/District_of_Columbia) is under the jurisdiction of the [Congress of the United States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congress_of_the_United_States) in accordance with Article 1, Section 8 of the [U.S. Constitution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.S._Constitution). The District was originally divided into three independent cities and two counties. [Alexandria County](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexandria_County,_D.C.) (which now forms [Arlington County](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arlington_County,_Virginia)) and the independent city of [Alexandria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexandria,_Virginia) was [returned](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/District_of_Columbia_retrocession) to Virginia in 1846. The three remaining entities (the City of Washington, [Georgetown](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georgetown,_Washington,_D.C.), and [Washington County](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Washington_County,_D.C.)) were merged into a consolidated government by an act of Congress in 1871. Congress has established a [home rule](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/District_of_Columbia_home_rule) government for the city, although city laws can be overridden by Congress. In practice the city operates much like other independent cities in the United States even though it does not meet the legal definition.
* Cities and towns in [New England](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_England) traditionally have very strong governments while counties have correspondingly less importance. Today, most counties in southern New England ([Connecticut](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Connecticut), [Rhode Island](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhode_Island), and [Massachusetts](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massachusetts)) have almost no governmental institutions or roles associated with them (aside from serving as a basis for court districts). Somewhat like the [ceremonial counties of England](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ceremonial_counties_of_England), counties in southern New England still have a nominal existence, and so no city or town in those three states is truly separate from a county, although the town and the county of Nantucket, Massachusetts (on the island of that name), as noted above, are coterminous, and the [City of Boston](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boston) used to provide both the complete governance and the complete revenue of its county, [Suffolk County](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suffolk_County,_Massachusetts), although Suffolk County also includes two much smaller cities and one town.

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