

"All That Is Loathsome" Life in the Five Points Slum

Lizabeth Peak details the rise and fall of the Five Points in lower Manhattan

OF ALL THE 19th-century slums of New York City, the worst by far was the Sixth Ward, commonly known as the Five Points. It was a wretched place where tens of thousands of destitute immigrants, packed into crumbling, vermin-infested tenements, existed in abject poverty, disease, crime, political corruption and gang warfare. The filthy streets were lined with saloons, gambling houses, dance halls and dens of prostitution.

Even Charles Dickens, intimately familiar with the horrors of the London slums, wrote in his *American Notes of 1842* about the Five Points:

We have seen no beggars in the streets by night or day; but of other kinds of strollers, plenty. Poverty, wretchedness, and vice, are rife enough where we are going now. This is the place: these narrow ways... reeking everywhere with dirt and filth.... Debauchery has made the very houses prematurely old. See how the rotten beams are tumbling down, and how the patched and broken windows seem to scowl dimly, like eyes that have been hurt in drunken frays.... Where dogs would howl to lie, women, and men, and boys slink off to sleep, forcing the dislodged rats to move away in quest of better lodgings. Here too are lanes and alleys, paved with mud knee-deep, underground chambers, where they dance and game... ruined houses, open to the street... hideous tenements which take their name from robbery and murder: all that is loathsome, drooping, and decayed is here.



Photo courtesy of Alan Batt.

The interior of a tenement apartment as preserved in the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City.

The Origin of the Five Points

The Five Points was named in the 1830s for the five points created by the intersections of Cross (now Park Row), Anthony (now Worth), Orange (now Baxter), Little Water (no longer exists) and Mulberry Streets. In colonial times, this area of lower Manhattan was mostly swampland, with a large pond known as the Collect. At the time, the Collect and its surroundings were a favorite spot for fisherman and picnickers. Unfortunately, by the late 1700s, the water had

become polluted by the effluent waste products of the tanneries, slaughterhouses and breweries that had sprung up near it. In 1802, in response to a rapidly rising population, it was recommended that the contaminated Collect be drained and filled. The project was completed in 1811, streets were laid down through the area and it was opened for settlement.

The neighborhood that developed there was poor, but

respectable. Many of its residents were tradesmen and craftsmen who operated out of their homes. It was a relatively peaceful place to live until about 1820, when several factors led to its decline. The growth of factories forced out many of the family-centered businesses. The apprentice system disappeared, leaving children and young adults idle and free to roam the streets unsupervised. Working families were replaced by impoverished Irish and German immigrants who couldn't

afford to live anywhere else. Unscrupulous landlords soon realized that they could profit by building an addition on to their already ramshackle wooden buildings and by packing more families into smaller quarters.

Also at this time, the landfill on which the area had been built began to decay, causing many of the buildings to sink and fall apart. Basements frequently flooded, outdoor privies overflowed and the streets ran with human and animal excrement and industrial waste. Unfit for liv-

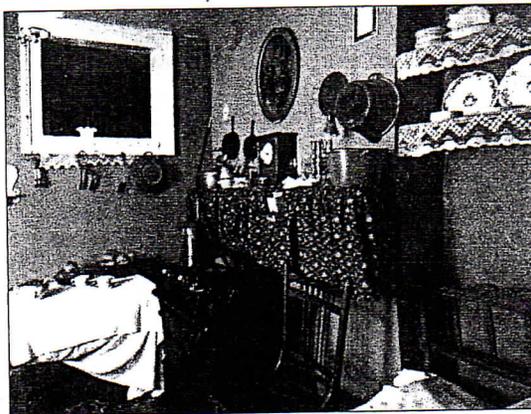


Photo courtesy of Lower East Side Tenement Museum.

The kitchen of a tenement apartment as preserved in the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.

ing quarters, many basements and lower floors housed saloons or brothels; these became breeding grounds for criminals of every sort. Respiratory diseases, poor nutrition and epidemics of cholera and typhus led to one of the highest death rates in the country, particularly among children. Filth, disease, vice and violent crime soon forced out the remaining respectable families, and by 1850, the Five Points had become one of the most dismal places in America.

"No Irish Need Apply"

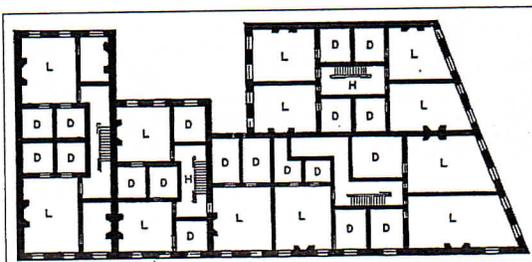
"All Europe is coming across the ocean... and what shall we do with them?" wrote

future New York mayor and diarist Philip Hone in 1836. "They increase our taxes, eat our bread and encumber our streets, and not one in twenty is competent to keep himself." By 1841, almost 100,000 Irish Catholics had poured into New York, sparking vicious anti-Catholic and anti-Irish bigotry and resentment among native-born workers. Both black and white men feared the loss of their jobs to the Irish, who, if they could get hired, would work for lower wages. "If I had the power," wrote one man anonymously, "I would erect a gallows at every landing place... and suspend every cursed Irishman as soon as he steps on our shores." Then, in the summer of 1845, came a crisis of catastrophic proportions — the Irish Potato Famine. Over the next five years, thousands of starving Irish families fled across the Atlantic, with as many as 700 men, women and children crammed into the cargo hold of a "coffin ship". Most had been tenant farmers in Ireland and had no skills to offer in a city. Many others had occupational skills — cabinet makers, shoe

makers, blacksmiths, weavers, tanners, etc. Virulent bigotry and mistrust, however, meant that there were no jobs for them when they got to America. By 1855, there were nearly 10,000 Irish in the Five Points, languishing in tenements with names like the Old Brewery, Jacob's Ladder, the Gates of Hell and Brick-Bat Mansion.

Tenement Life and the "Cellar Dwellers"

When the decrepit and decaying houses of the Sixth Ward filled to capacity with immigrants, money-hungry slumlords created a new kind of building — the "tenant



The above floor plan is from Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives*, published in 1890. The caption reads in part: "Here are twelve living-rooms and twenty-one bedrooms, and only six of the latter have any provision or possibility for the admission of light and air, excepting through the family sitting- and living-room; being utterly dark, close, and unventilated. The living-rooms are but 10 x 12 feet, the bedrooms 6½ x 7 feet." L stands for light, D for dark and H for hallways.

Right; the Barracks.



house" or tenement. Multi-family dwellings had existed in New York for some time, but they had been originally built for some other purpose. The first building constructed specifically as a tenement went up in the early 1830s. Large, flimsy, multi-storied wooden structures, they were designed to house as many people as the landlord could cram in. At its peak, the Old Brewery held more than 1,000 people; another, known as The Barracks, at one time housed over 1,100 souls.

A Five Points tenement was a miserable place to live. Poorly built, vermin-infested firetraps, they were filthy, dark and airless, freezing in winter and sweltering in summer. The Society for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor stated upon the housing that they were "...crazy old buildings — crowded rear tenements in filthy yards; dark, damp basements; leaky garrets, shops, out-houses, and stables converted to dwellings, though scarcely fit to shelter brutes — are the habitations of thousands of fellow citizens of this wealthy city."

The typical tenement consisted of a front and a rear building with a square court between them — a "double decker". The front rooms of the front building were the most desirable, as they received the most light and air. Less desirable were the back

rooms of either building, and worst of all were the underground cellars.

At the heart of the Five Points was the Old Brewery. Originally built in 1792 as Coulter's Brewery, on the old Collect, its name changed when it became too decrepit for use as a business and became a dwelling. An alley on its north side led to a room known as the Den of Thieves, in which some 75 men, women and children lived; most of the women were prostitutes. The other side of the

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passageway earned the name Murderers' Alley. Fighting was almost constant, and it is believed that the alley averaged almost a murder a night for 15 years. The notorious tenement alley known as Cow Bay was originally the site of a small bay in the Collect pond, where farmers took their cattle for water. In the early days of the Points, it had been a respectable cul-de-sac at the end of Little Water Street, but with the decline of the district, it became a filthy alley lined with tenements. Many of the Cow Bay buildings were connected by underground passages — ideal hiding places for thieves and murderers, and whatever was left of their victims. "If you would see Cow Bay," wrote the anonymous author of an 1854 book called *Hot Corn*, "saturate your handkerchief with camphor, so that you can endure the horrible stench, and enter... what do we see? ... nothing but rags, and dirt, and vermin, and rum-degraded human beings."

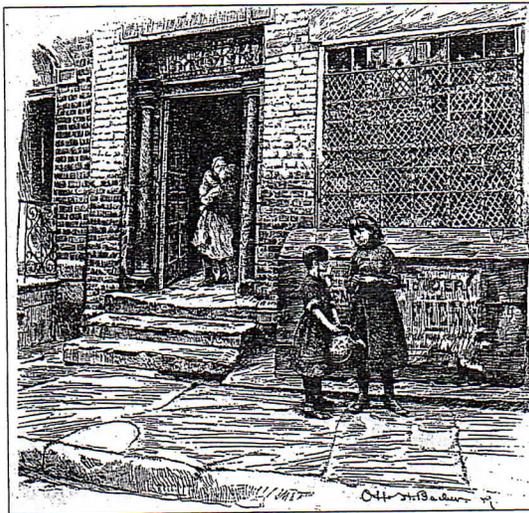
"Dens of death"

In 1850, the *New York Daily Tribune* ran a series of articles on the so-called "dens of death" — the cellars and basements of the tenement houses. Built one to two stories below ground level, the ceilings were often too low for a human to stand upright. They were almost completely devoid of light and ventilation. The main room of the cellar apartment usually had only one window that often could not be opened. The bedrooms in the rear of the cellar had no windows at all. Poor drainage in the streets often caused flooding after a rain, the water sometimes breaking through the foundation and carrying with it mud, garbage and excrement. The stench was horrific. As the *Tribune* noted, "There is not a farmer's hog pen in the country, that is not immeasurably ahead of them in point of health — often in point of cleanliness."

Some tenement cellars were kept much cleaner, but only to attract their particular clientele.

Some cellars housed dens of prostitution, where women, and often children, openly plied their services. Others served as rum shops (euphemistically referred to as "green-groceries"), dance halls, or gambling houses for "the lowest class of sots". The *Tribune* reported that at least 410 rum shops operated in the Points.

Other cellars were devoted to lodging boarders. For 37½ cents a week, a boarder would get clean straw to sleep on and first crack at whatever food the old women and children had managed to buy or beg that day. For 18¾ cents, one got a bit of bare floor and second chance at the day's food. And



A 19th-century illustration of the Five Points.

for nine cents a week, the "third class" boarder was permitted to fight over whatever was left on the table, and had the privilege of sleeping in the doorway.

Children suffered the most under these deplorable conditions. The more fortunate ones might earn a few pennies as boot-blacks or street cleaners, or by selling newspapers or matches. However, thousands of children, neglected by absent, indifferent or inebriated parents, roamed the streets day and night. In 1854, it was estimated that approximately 34,000 homeless children struggled to survive on the streets of New York. Dressed in rags, their hair matted with dirt, they were easy targets for criminals and

highly susceptible to disease and injury. When they were not on the street, many children sought food and shelter in the cellar rum shops and brothels, where they soon learned the skills necessary for a life of thievery, prostitution and gang membership.

The Gangs of New York

The earliest gangs of New York City arose out of the squalid tenements and rum shops of the Five Points, where murderers, thieves, pickpockets and prostitutes congregated, far from the eyes of the authorities. The first gang to establish a defined organization and hierarchy of leadership was the Forty Thieves. Under their chief, Edward Coleman, the gang members held their meetings in the back room of Rosanna Peers' "green-grocery", where they shared reports of their activities and organized various "missions". Soon, other gangs, predominantly Irish, organized along similar lines — the Chichesters, Shirt-Tails, Roach Guards, Plug Uglies and Dead Rabbits. The Plug Uglies were particularly feared, even by other gangs. The gang's name was taken from the members' large plug hats, which they stuffed with wool or leather and used as helmets during battles. Mostly huge Irishmen, they sauntered through the

streets carrying bludgeons or brickbats, with pistols in their pockets and heavy hob-nailed boots with which to pound their victims. The Dead Rabbits were originally part of the Roach Guards, but internal dissension developed. During one particularly heated meeting, someone reportedly threw a dead rabbit into the middle of the room. Taking this as a sign, one of the factions left the group and adopted their new name. (In the vernacular of the day, a "rabbit" was a rowdy man, and a "dead rabbit" was a particularly big, strong "rabbit".) They distinguished themselves by parading through the streets sporting a dead rabbit impaled on a long spike.

All the gangs employed children as scouts, decoys, messengers and pickpockets, and most of them had their juvenile counterpart — the Little Forty Thieves (led by a girl known as Wild Maggie), the Little Dead Rabbits and the Little Plug Uglies. Gangs of all girls were almost as common as boys' gangs.

The Rabbits and the Guards hated each other deeply, but all the Points' gangs were unified in their hostility towards the gangs of other districts, notably the working-class, mostly native-born gangs of the Bowery — the Bowery Boys, the True Blue Americans, the American Guards, the Atlantic Guards and the O'Connell Guards, among others.

Whenever a rumble broke out (and they broke out constantly), a large crowd would gather, and no one wanted to be left out of the fun. Even the women, such as the infamous Hell-Cat Maggie, enthusiastically pitched in. The gang members were especially known for their creative methods of torture and mutilation of blacks, policemen and soldiers, as well as

rival gang members. In the 1830s, when the political powers of New York came to realize the benefits of alliance with the gangs, the violence between them reached a completely new level. With the covert backing of the politicians and the cooperation of the corrupt police force, rioting and violence, especially on election days, became a profitable venture for the gang members.

The Reformers

By 1850, concern for the poor, especially the children, was on the rise among New York's middle and upper classes. Dozens of welfare organizations sprung up, such as the New York Society for the Reformation of Juvenile Delinquents and The Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children. In 1850, the Ladies' Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church sent the Reverend Lewis Morris Pease and his wife to the Five Points for the express purpose of counteracting "Romish [Catholic] influence". But the Reverend soon saw that the physical needs of the slum

dwellers far outweighed the spiritual. When the Ladies paid him a visit and found him delivering bolts of cloth instead of sermons, they fired him. Pease stayed in the Points, and in 1856 established the Five Points House of Industry. A permanent building was later built on the site of Cow Bay.

In 1853, Episcopal clergyman Charles Loring Brace founded the Children's Aid Society. For 17 cents a night, a homeless or neglected child could get a hot meal, a bath and a bed, along with a little Protestant instruction. Within a year, Brace's orphanages were overflowing. He came to believe that the best thing for these children was to find them "good Christian homes" on the farms and small towns of the Midwest. Thus the orphan trains were born. Over the next 75 years, as many as 400,000 children were "placed out" with families who agreed to accept them as their own. Concerned at seeing so many Catholic children placed in Protestant homes, the Catholic Charities of New York began their own system of "mercy trains".

THE DEAD RABBIT RIOT

INDEPENDENCE DAY, 1857, promised to be like any other holiday in the Five Points — an excuse to drink to excess and create as much mayhem as possible.

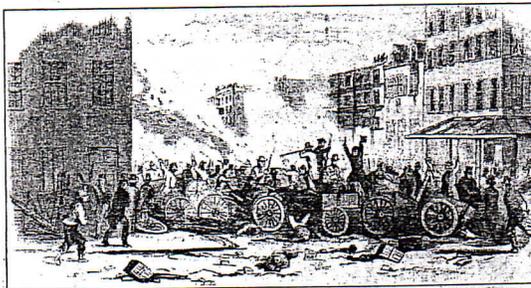
The timing was particularly opportune; the deeply corrupt Municipal Police Force, which traditionally ignored the activities of the Five Points gangs, had recently been disbanded by the state legislature. When asked to remain on duty for a few days (without pay) as unofficial peacekeepers, they responded that, in the absence of any official recognition as police officers, the peace would not be kept by any of them. The newly formed and pitifully inexperienced Metropolitan Police were on their own.

That evening, several Five Points gangs, led by the Dead Rabbits, invaded the Bowery, attacking several Metropolitans and raiding the headquarters of the Bowery Boys. The other Bowery gangs quickly rallied to their defense, and soon heavy fighting raged all along Bayard Street.

The Metropolitans' attempts to quell the disturbance were quickly repelled; one officer was severely

beaten before being sent back to his station in his underwear. News of the rioting spread quickly, and gang members and unaffiliated thugs from all over the city flocked to the Bowery. The fighting escalated and spread to Baxter, Elizabeth and Mulberry Streets. With the police distracted, the rioters looted shops, assaulted pedestrians, and set fire to homes and businesses. Later that night, three regiments of militia responded, and by morning a tenuous peace had been restored, though isolated skirmishes continued throughout the week. By July 8, the Bowery was relatively peaceful, the gangs having lost so many members to arrest, injury and death that a truce was called.

An estimated 800 to 1,000 rioters had participated in the melee. The official toll was listed at eight dead and a hundred wounded, but rumor held that it was a hundred who died and that the gangs had secretly buried their dead in cellars and tunnels. In terms of loss of life and property, it was the worst riot to hit New York City until the Draft Riots of 1863.



Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper featured the above scene from the riot. The caption reads in part: "View from 'Dead Rabbit' barricade in Bayard Street, taken at the height of the battle"

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Probably no other reformer had as profound and as lasting an effect on the Five Points as Jacob Riis. Riis arrived from Denmark in 1870 and, after seven years as a poverty-stricken immigrant, managed to find work as a police reporter for the *New York Tribune*. In 1890, he published his groundbreaking expose, *How the Other Half Lives*. The book featured graphic photographs of New York's poorest and their living conditions. He was responsible for the demolition of whole neighborhoods such as the horrific Mulberry Bend, which was replaced with a park. He supervised the razing of many rear tenements and the building of settlement houses. He pioneered rent control, organized leisure activities for kids and supported the assimilation of ethnic groups into American culture. As a result of Riis' efforts, laws were passed requiring fire escapes, banisters on stairways and ventilating transoms over doorways. While tenements themselves did not go away, their design and architecture were vastly improved.

The Five Points In the 20th Century

By the turn of the century, the Five Points had lost much of its reputation as the worst slum in America. Although the gangs persisted (and do, of course, to this day), new waves of immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe changed the face of the gangs. By 1890, the Irish gangs were no longer in control of the Five Points, replaced by groups such as the Eastmans, led by Jewish Brooklynite Monk Eastman, and the Five-Pointers, led by Italian Paolo Vaccarelli, aka Paul Kelly. (Kelly's lasting legacy to American organized crime was a young protégé named Al Capone.)

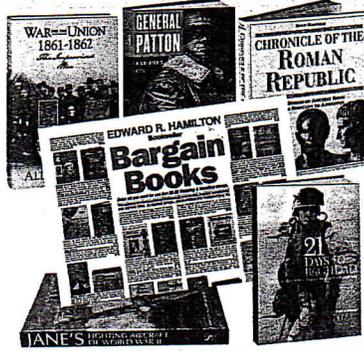
The most recent settlers into the Five Points were Asians. Today, the area of the Five Points slum is occupied by Columbus Park, city, state and federal court-houses and by the Chinatown district.

FURTHER READING

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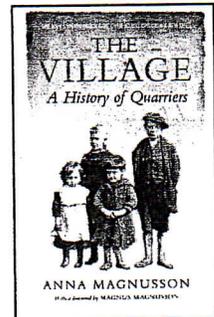
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