

Rethinking the Most Notorious Slum in America: Five Points, Slumming, and the Immigrant
Experience in Nineteenth-Century New York City

Jamie Bishop
Undergraduate Senior Thesis
Department of History
Columbia University
3 April 2024

Seminar Instructor: Professor Samuel Coggeshall
Second Reader: Professor Kimberly Phillips-Fein

Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Introduction	4
Chapter One: The Rise of Five Points	19
Chapter Two: Slumming and Slum Literature	37
Chapter Three: Change and Continuity in Five Points	59
Conclusion	79
Bibliography	83

Acknowledgements

Living in Ireland for two years and studying Irish history inspired me to write this thesis. After I moved to New York, I wanted to learn about the journey that so many Irish immigrants made here too. It would not be without the resources, support, and expertise of all my professors at Columbia that I was able to connect these histories. Especially my thesis seminar instructor, Professor Sam Coggeshall, who has been an overwhelming force of encouragement for me and the reason I have been able to finish this project with relatively few bumps along the road. Thank you for your time outside of class to discuss my work and for pushing me to become a better writer and historian. Thank you also to my second reader, Professor Kimberly Phillips-Fein, for your resources, advice, and conversation. You gave me confidence in my project and helped take it to its fullest potential.

A special acknowledgement to my classmates for reading this project from its conception, listening to my ideas, and commenting on every draft I produced. You are all incredible humans and thinkers, and I am grateful to have had such a great group to hold me accountable throughout this year. A shout out to my roommate at Columbia, Jax, for your kindness, emotional support, and listening to me rant about all the work I had to do. Thank you also to Austin who was with me during some of my most intense writing sessions and let me read outloud (for hours) my final draft. Finally, I want to acknowledge my wonderful family. My mom and dad have been the biggest champions of my education and supported me unconditionally throughout my time in college. Thank you for your curiosity in my project and providing me with the strength to do it. To my siblings Jo and Sam, while you might never read this thesis, you guys kept me disciplined and emotionally sane. Thank you for always sitting in the mud with me.

Introduction

This is, indeed, a sad, an awful sight — a sight to make the blood slowly congeal and the heart to grow fearful and cease its beatings. Here whence these streets diverge in dark and endless paths, whose steps take hold on hell — here is the very type and physical semblance, in fact, of hell itself.

– G.G. Foster, *New York by Gaslight*, 1850.

By the late 1830s, Five Points was known as one of the most wretched places on earth. Named after the intersection of Park, Worth, and Baxter streets in Lower Manhattan, Five Points was home to thousands of the poorest immigrants in North America hoping to start their lives in a staggering, bustling, and alien city. With the advent of one of the greatest periods of Atlantic migration, New York was overwhelmed in its complexity and diversity. One neighborhood received particular attention amidst New York’s striking changes. Tucked away in irregular streets and cul-de-sacs, Five Points was presented in the press as the incarnation of “hell itself.”¹ Tenement buildings were “packed to [their] utmost capacity,” the streets “hideously dirty,” and its residents, the most “hopeless, crime-stained visages” in Manhattan.²

Five Points was first constructed over a freshwater pond in 1802 when city officials decided that new housing was needed for New York’s growing population.³ Over the next few decades, mud rose in the poorly-irrigated streets and its buildings started to cave in and sink.⁴ Tenants and business owners abandoned Five Points for nicer housing in Upper Manhattan, making its buildings the cheapest available housing for the newest arrivals of European immigrants. The neighborhood contained the most diverse and poor working-class communities in New York. But the decay of its streets, inescapable stench, and crowded tenement housing,

¹ G.G. Foster, *New York by Gaslight* (New York: Dewitt & Davenport, 1850), 53.

² James D. McCabe, *Lights and Shadows of New York Life*, (Philadelphia: National Publishing Co., 1872), 399.

³ Tyler Anbinder, “‘We Will Dirk Every Mother’s Son of You’: Five Points and the Irish Conquest of New York”, *Éire-Ireland* 36, no. 2 (2001), 29.

⁴ Anbinder, “‘We Will Dirk Every Mother’s Son’”, 29.

along with the many saloons, dancehalls, and brothels in the neighborhood, became landmarks of Five Points as the first slum in America.

Despite the “dark and endless paths” of Five Points, the lives of these new immigrants were visible to the tourist outsider, and highly documented by them too.⁵ Writers visited the windy streets where violence and murders took place, and reported the sights of child beggars, bar fights, and livestock in the bedrooms of Italian families.⁶ Hundreds of exposé articles, best-selling novels, guidebooks, and surveys featured the sinful landscape of Five Points and its incestuous, thieving immigrants. In 1841, Charles Dickens ventured on a five month tour of America, omitting no detail in his chronicle of Five Points: “Here, too, are lanes and alleys, paved with mud knee deep; underground chambers, where they dance and game...hideous tenements which take their name from robbery and murder; all that is loathsome, drooping and decayed is here.”⁷ He continued, describing the immigrant and African American residents: “many of those pigs live here. Do they ever wonder why their masters walk upright in lieu of going on all fours? Why they talk instead of grunting?”⁸ His description of Five Points propelled the neighborhood into international fame, and *American Notes* initiated a new genre of city-mystery and urban sketchbook publications. The imagery of vice and barbarity became common literary tactics that responded to recognizably poor, laboring neighborhoods that emerged in the nineteenth-century.

While Dickens’s report on Five Points reached international audiences, he was just one of many travelers who contributed to the notoriety of Five Points. By the 1840s, its sensationalized reputation already brought in tourists and wealthy elites to visit its narrow alleyways and

⁵ Foster, *New York by Gaslight*, 53.

⁶ Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points: The 19th Century New York City Neighborhood that Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum*. (New York: Free Press, 2001), 221.

⁷ Charles Dickens, *American Notes* (1842; London, 1995), 80.

⁸ Dickens, *American Notes*, 82.

windowless cellars that housed entire families.⁹ In the 1850s, new steamboat channels along the Hudson River also made travel to New York more accessible to middle-class Americans and foreign tourists, who were eager to experience and share stories of an uncivilized world in Five Points. In fact, this activity came to be known as “slumming,” which was described in an 1884 *New York Times* article as “the most fashionable idiosyncrasy” and “the rage this winter.”¹⁰

Slumming constituted the act of traversing class and racial boundaries for investigative, leisurely, or commercial purposes (See Figure 1).¹¹ While journalists and elite men were among the first to participate in the so-called slum expeditions of Five Points, slumming grew to be the newest form of leisure for middle-class Americans. Slumming also included the consumption of literature produced by slumming accounts. These activities were both a cause and a product of Five Points’ lurid reputation in the American media.



Fig 1: Escorted by the police, a wealthy family goes “slumming” in Five Points¹²

⁹ Edward Crapsey, *The Nether Side of New York; or, The Vice, Crime and Poverty of the Great Metropolis*, (New York: Sheldon & Company, 1872), 134.

¹⁰ “Slumming in This Town”, *The New York Times* (January, 1884).

¹¹ Also see Chad Heap and Seth Koven’s definition of a “slum” on pages 13 and 14. The definition of slumming will be expanded upon throughout this thesis.

¹² “Doing the Slums”, *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* 61, (December, 1885), 245.

There is no doubt that Five Points contained crime and poverty in nineteenth-century New York, but its lasting reputation as a mythical slum far outweighs the reality of the immigrant, working-class experience. This thesis seeks to contextualize the representations of Five Points in the press, tourist guidebooks, and reform discourses from 1826 to 1896 through the act of slumming and reevaluate the way race, class, and crime intersected in these depictions. While Five Points changed during this period as each new immigrant group arrived, its legacy in the press largely remained the same. As an object of slumming and slum literature, Five Points provided an opportunity for middle-class slum-goers, journalists, and reformers to assign meaning to the poor and highly visible immigrant class, and to project their anxieties about race, religion, and poverty. This thesis shows that the sensationalization of Five Points speaks more to the middle-class responses to the arrival of immigrants than it does to the lives of the immigrants themselves. Deconstructing these depictions allows Five Points to be remembered instead as a focal point of the immigrant experience and as a battleground for their assertion of social, political, and religious rights.

This thesis examines Five Points over a seventy-year period from the arrival of Irish immigrants in the early 1830s, to the influx of Italians to the neighborhood in the 1880s. When Five Points made its first appearance in the American press in 1826, many Irish immigrants had just begun to settle there.¹³ This period captures a time of immense demographic and social change in New York when Americans started slumming in Five Points. From 1830 to 1845, the percentage of foreign-born residents in New York grew from nine to thirty-six percent, and stabilized at around fifty-one percent in 1855.¹⁴ This growth was unprecedented in the city's history, and unleashed a wave of anti-immigrant politics and hostile attention from anxious

¹³ "CORNELIUS" to the Editor, *Evening Post* (September, 1826).

¹⁴ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 47.

Protestant Americans. While the Great Famine explains the enormous numbers of Irish arrivals in New York, immigrants from Germany, Poland, and England also came to the Five Points in significant numbers.¹⁵ With cheap housing readily available, Five Points was the first home of these European immigrants.

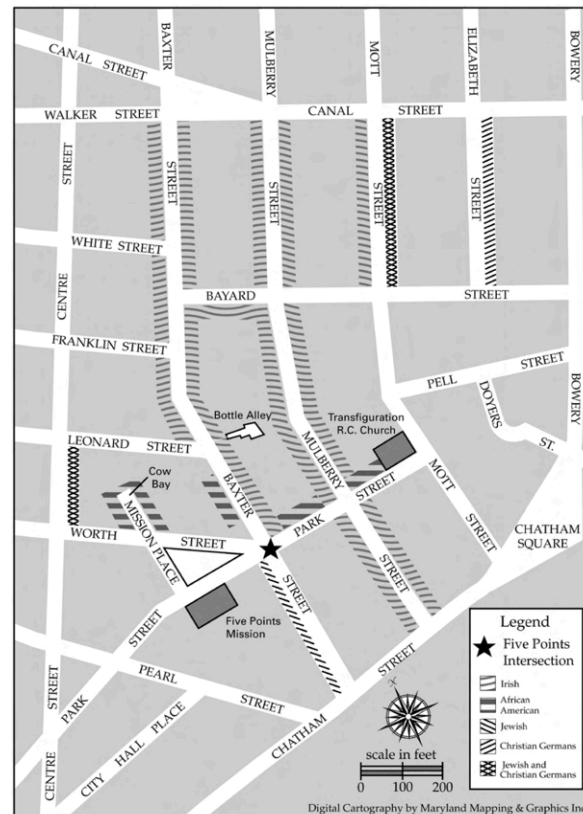


Figure 2: Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points Ethnic and Racial Enclaves, 1850*¹⁶

The Irish made up sixty-six percent of the population in Five Points by 1850 (and forty percent of New York's total population). Many arrived famished and destitute, and were willing to live anywhere that would take them.¹⁷ African Americans made up fourteen percent of the population of Five Points in 1825, but their number dwindled at around three or four percent in the 1840s. By the 1880s, many Irish began moving uptown — although there remained a significant portion of second generation Irish immigrants — and Jewish, Italian, and Chinese

¹⁵ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 35

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 47.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 43.

immigrants began to inhabit their respective block-enclaves within Five Points. Overall, the percentage of foreign-born residents in Five Points peaked at eighty-nine in 1855.¹⁸

The significance of the new and overwhelming presence of pauper immigrants in Five Points was central to how the neighborhood was depicted. As one Methodist minister wrote in 1864, “all the nations of the earth are represented.”¹⁹ While some observers responded in awe of the diversity of Five Points, others warned of the “insidious wiles of foreign influence.”²⁰ The United States, it was believed, was entering a new era of changes from the influx of foreigners, who sought to damage its institutions and steal the privileges of a superior nation. Race, therefore, played an important part in how Five Points received its detrimental characterization in the news, and in history. As the demographic of New York changed, so did the visualization and conceptualization of race.

The ethnic diversity certainly accounted for why people went slumming in Five Points. For many Americans, it may have been the first time they had ever seen European people in their private, lived spaces, or even freed African-Americans in non-segregated spaces. But Five Points also represented an environment where Victorian inhibitions seemed to disappear; drugs, gambling, prostitution, and rampant drinking were commonplace in the underground saloons of Five Points. As one 1864 guidebook describes, a respectable man could not enter Five Points “without risking his safety or his life. Murders, robberies, and crimes of all kinds were numerous. Fugitives from justice found a sure refuge here, and the officers of the law frequently did not dare to seek them in their hiding places.”²¹ The middle-class was alarmed to witness how vice could conceal itself within an evangelical city. The inebriated and profane

¹⁸ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 43.

¹⁹ Quoted in Pamela Haag, “The ‘Ill-Use of a Wife’: Patterns of Working-Class Violence in Domestic and Public New York City, 1860-1880,” *Journal of Social History* 25 (1992), 455.

²⁰ Joseph F. Atwill, *The Crisis! An Appeal to Our Countrymen on the Subject of Foreign Influence in the United States!* (New York: No. 201 Broadway, 1844), 3.

²¹ McCabe, *Lights and Shadows*, 400.

behavior of Five Points residents confirmed the deepest-held beliefs of men and women, who feared how easily vice might spread to the rest of the city.

At the same time, stories of crime turned Five Points into an environment of illegal fantasy within a strict homosocial culture.²² Many slumming accounts note the contrast as they wandered from City Hall and the emerging financial district towards the rowdy and crowded tenement buildings of Five Points. This guidebook remarked that “You may... gaze right into Broadway with its marble palaces of trade... and its roar and bustle so indicative of wealth and prosperity. It is almost within pistol shot, but what a wide gulf lies between the... shabby, dirty creatures who go slouching by.”²³

Despite the safety warnings, many still went to the sworn-off streets of Five Points, witnessing how violence and poverty could be surrounded by such markers of civilization. But with the propagation of these tales and myths, Five Points became known as a place that threatened a kind of “moral geography” of white civility. The act of slumming displayed these moral boundaries, while the media disseminated them into a language of racial prejudices and nativist attitudes. And in an attempt to protect their majority, reformers and politicians set out to vocalize how the problems of Five Points and its immigrant residents jeopardized America at large.

Although Five Points garnered significant attention in contemporary media, much of the historical study of Five Points has not detached itself from its nineteenth-century legacy until recently. In 1991, archaeological excavations in present-day Five Points re-exposed the historical

²² The term “homosocial” refers to racial and sexual segregation in New York. Prior to the 1880s, it was not common for men and women to share public, social spaces, nor for cross-racial interactions to take place. Between the 1880s and World War II, these boundaries became less apparent and had much to do with the growth of commercialized leisurely spaces. Slumming in prohibition-era New York also encouraged heterosocial interactions. See Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006). See also Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

²³ McCabe, *Lights and Shadows*, 399.

neighborhood to its once detrimental, yet exciting reputation in the academic and popular world.²⁴ Newspapers and headlines drew on sensationalized nineteenth-century narratives of crime and gangs, as well as unforgotten stereotypes of race, class, and poverty. These reports, in part, were influenced by Herbert Asbury's popular account of the neighborhood, *Gangs of New York* (1927). Asbury depicted the rise and fall of Five Points through the perspective of gang violence by groups such as the Bowery Boys and the Dead Rabbits, tracing their role in race relations, saloons, entertainment, and Tammany Hall politics.²⁵ His dramatic report was the basis of Martin Scorsese's film *Gangs of New York* (2002) starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Daniel Day-Lewis, showing the role that the media has and *still* plays in Five Point's gruesome characterization in history.²⁶

Asbury ensured that for yet another century, Five Points would be exclusively seen for its crime and dark, hidden secrets. In the wake of its popularity in the academic world of the 1990s, Luc Sante, a resident of the Lower East Side, wrote *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York* (1991). It was dubbed in the press as a "phony, hipster rewrite" of Asbury's *Gangs of New York*, and appears — at least to twenty-first century audiences — to echo the language of contemporary spectators: "placid smoking citizens and thin dogs standing around, or frantic policemen, thieves, and whores rushing through...the [Gates of Hell] testify to the ferocity with which the dwellers repulsed visitors."²⁷ While Sante brought much to light about "The Invisible City," his portrayal of immigrant families, including children who "as young as five or six were enrolled to learn pocket picking, purse snatching, or cart robbery," was severely lacking.²⁸ Both

²⁴ See <https://www.gsa.gov/about-us/regions/region-2-northeast-and-caribbean/about-region-2/five-points-site>

²⁵ Herbert Asbury, *Gangs of New York* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc: 1927), 27.

²⁶ Martin Scorsese, *GANGS OF NEW YORK* (USA/Italy: Miramax, 2002).

²⁷ Paul Reckner, "Remembering Gotham: Urban Legends, Public History, and Representations of Poverty, Crime, and Race in New York City", *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 6, no. 2 (2002), 96; Luc Sante, *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York*, (New York: Farrar, 1991), 76.

²⁸ Sante, *Low Life*, 118.

Asbury and Sante produced popular histories of Five Points, and there still lacked scholarship which addressed a social history independent of the crime infestations and cinematic appeal of Five Points and its immigrant residents. Little was known about the lives of the inhabitants themselves, how they landed in New York, and participated in the workforce and cultural life.

More recently, scholars have turned their attention to Five Points, especially as they revisit the history of immigration. Publishing the first, in-depth study of the neighborhood, Tyler Anbinder provides a detailed examination of Five Points in his 2001 book, *Five Points: The 19th Century New York City Neighborhood that Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum*. He aimed to “set the record straight,” using previously unseen bank statements, court records, and marriage licenses from the immigrants of Five Points. His work adds a nuanced perspective to the neighborhood as a site of machine politics, social rights, entertainment, transnationalism, and immigrant identity. While he does not deny the existence of crime and poverty, Anbinder asserts that many contemporary accounts were largely distorted from the truth. Despite its undoubted crime, Five Points was also a “quintessential immigrant saga” of struggle, success, and self-conscious identity building.²⁹ Anbinder’s work is a valuable foundation for this thesis, but my approach differs in addressing the reputation of Five Points from the perspective of slumming and the middle-class media. Detaching the legacy of the media from the neighborhood itself enhances Anbinder’s comprehensive rewriting of the Five Points’ historical narrative.

While Anbinder sought to discredit the reputation that was so “firmly and irreversibly established” in contemporary media, research on Five Points through the perspective of slumming and slum literature has yet to be published.³⁰ Most research on the phenomenon of

²⁹ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 3.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 4.

slumming or crime tourism has largely been interrogated by sociologists, on topics such as 9/11 or tourism in third world countries.³¹ However, within the last few decades, some historians have found the study of slumming to be invaluable in social and cultural histories. For example, Seth Koven looked at slumming in nineteenth-century London in his book, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London*. His research proposes that social welfare agents, missionaries, and philanthropists felt compelled to visit London slums, but that the line between altruism and sexual gratification in observing the poor was not easily distinguishable.³²

The practice of slumming in London, as it was defined in the nineteenth-century, as well as the surrounding literature on slumming, reveals many similarities to the outpouring of writing on Five Points. British public debates on child poverty, hygiene, and homelessness were often “sparked by and tapped into anxieties about sex, sexuality, and gender roles.”³³ The middle-class motivations of slumming reflected and reinforced their own class, gender, and race through an “eroticization of poverty.”³⁴ Koven thus complicates the intent behind reform in early modern slums, showing, for instance, that a reformer’s photographs of poor families were often staged for artistic purposes and that incentives for visiting slums included stories to impress dinner parties.³⁵ His research prompts alternate readings of the sources and images ingrained in Five Points history, and questions the degree to which slumming facilitated voyeuristic fantasies.

Just two years later, historian Chad Heap greatly expanded on the history and meaning behind slumming in America. He ties the emergence of slumming to Five Points as a form of cultural amusement, but principally examines its practice in Prohibition-era Chicago and New

³¹ See Erik Cohen, “Tourism-related Crime: Towards a Sociology of Crime and Tourism”, *Visions in Leisure and Business* 16, no. 1 (1997), 4-13.

³² Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 4.

³³ Koven, *Slumming*, 86.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 4.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 130.

York. Through the perspective of race and sexuality, Heap argues that slumming contributed to the “codification” of a “new hegemonic social order” in the twentieth century.³⁶ The context of social reform in the early 1900s is crucial to his argument, in which previously segregated spaces became sites of exotic sexual and social exploration for middle-class Americans.

Immigrant-owned speakeasies and Harlem jazz clubs were venues that whites *chose* to explore, allowing marginalized groups to renegotiate their social status, but also ensuring that the so-called slums continued to be seen as containers of immorality and degradation. Moreover, Heap defines the slum as a spatial and ideological construct — “both a physical urban space and a white middle-class idea about that space and the people who inhabited it.”³⁷ The presence of a slum, therefore, necessitated notions of poverty, but slumming proliferated its connection to race and morality. His theoretical approach and his definition of slumming is a valuable foundation for this thesis.

The term “moral geography” was used in the discussion of Five Points to describe a physical and social division between neighborhoods. It corresponded to class boundaries in commercial and residential spaces, and heavily insinuated a sense of racial otherness. Mary Ting Yi Lui offers an insightful study of moral geography in immigrant history and the development of ethnic enclaves in New York. In *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery*, Lui explores how the 1909 disappearance of a young missionary woman in Chinatown exploded in the New York press, leading to public hysteria over the growing Chinese bachelor population.³⁸ While Chinatown’s opium joints, gambling dens, and brothels were widely known to New Yorkers, the supposed murder of Elsie Sigel by a Chinese man led to hundreds of reports and investigations on the

³⁶ Heap, *Slumming*, 3.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 18.

³⁸ Mary Ting Yi Lui, *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery: Murder, Miscegenation, and Other Dangerous Encounters in Turn-of-the-Century New York City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 9-14.

illicit activities and social threats that the Chinese immigrant population allegedly posed. Through the use of tourist guidebooks, newspapers, and reform journals, Lui shows how the media launched a narrative of dark and light against Chinatown's crime and dangers — the same language used against Five Points — to carve moral boundaries into the city.³⁹ She tells an important story of how race, poverty, and culture can be inextricably and permanently tied to a dark and unrespectable landscape in popular imagination, and this concept will be translated to nineteenth-century ideas of moral geography, and its symbiotic relationship to slumming.

Many Americans believed that the racial, religious, cultural, and political differences of the immigrant population made them inferior to Anglo-Americans and unfit for assimilation.⁴⁰ The complicated racial dynamics between immigrants and white Americans are central to the depiction of Five Points. In the nineteenth century, European immigrants were labeled a sub-white, or non-white race. Pseudoscientific writings associated their behavior and physiognomic appearance with a subordinated class, one that would be more difficult to integrate with Protestant America.⁴¹ Since at least the 1980s, historians have pondered the notion of race and assimilation in American history, devoting particular attention to Irish immigrants.

Noel Ignatiev used race as a framework to understand how the Irish adapted to life in America. In *How the Irish Became White*, Ignatiev evaluates how the Catholic Irish went from an oppressed class in nineteenth-century Ireland and New York, to establishing themselves as “the oppressor” against their black neighbors.⁴² Through Abolition, the Draft Riots, and the Irish fight over nativism, Ignatiev found that contemporary notions of race, both those imposed onto the new immigrant class and later, consciously employed by them, is essential to understanding

³⁹ Lui, *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery*, 30.

⁴⁰ Catherine Eagan, “‘White,’ If ‘Not Quite’: Irish Whiteness in the Nineteenth-Century Irish-American Novel”, *Éire-Ireland* 36, no. 1 (2001), 66.

⁴¹ Eagan, “‘White,’ If ‘Not Quite’”, 69.

⁴² Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 25.

how Irish immigrants became a politically dominant, rising class in New York.⁴³ Along with Ignatiev, it has been commonly suggested that Irish and Italian immigrants lobbied for white racial status throughout the twentieth century in order to gain social and economic security.⁴⁴ In Five Points, immigrant groups negotiated their rights for the first time, often erupting into political and racial conflict. The study of Five Points also offers a closer look at how these groups were racialized and subordinated in popularized media depictions. Slumming played a part in encoding the social orders that immigrant groups were forced to adapt to in the next decades.

At the same time that many New Yorkers were making sense of race in America, there was an unfolding discourse around class politics in the city. Sean Wilentz explores the relationship between politics and the rise of the working class in New York from 1788 to 1850 in his book, *Chants Democratic* (2004). Wilentz looks at the emergence of a class and political rhetoric in the nineteenth century, and how political conflicts were deeply tied to perceptions of ethnic, religious, occupational, and “status” divisions.⁴⁵ While Five Points sat at the periphery of Wilentz’s history of political violence in New York, it was still important as a deeply working-class neighborhood with a unique, immigrant political character. For nineteenth-century New Yorkers, Five Points was both an exemplar of “pure republican equality” and a chaotic, “lower-class haven.”⁴⁶ The context of nativist uprisings and labor competitions between the native and immigrant groups is important to this thesis. Against this backdrop, the depictions of Five Points in the press can be analyzed as attempts to alleviate social antagonisms — either as a

⁴³ Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 27.

⁴⁴ See David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991). Also see Homi Bhabha’s description of the “ironic compromise” in Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

⁴⁵ Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004), 8.

⁴⁶ Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 27.

sinful place to justify nativist politics, or in its harmless and frivolous nature to comfort middle-class anxieties over labor competition.

Existing scholarship has not yet brought together the study of Five Points, slumming, and the immigrant experience. This thesis will examine the relationship between middle-class slumming as a mechanism that was used to observe and write about the urban poor, and the lived experience of the immigrant population in Five Points. Throughout the nineteenth century, the neighborhood became an object of tourism and national fascination over its foreign population, crime, sexual promiscuity, and interracial relationships. These themes were weaponized in contemporary reform discourses, tourist guidebooks, and the news, reflecting middle-class responses to the changing racial and class dynamics in New York. As a whole, this thesis argues against the characterization of Five Points as a slum. Untangling Five Points from the way it was depicted and imagined allows the neighborhood to be remembered instead as a place of mobility and agency for immigrants in New York.

The first chapter will explore why Five Points became so notorious in the nineteenth-century media. I will first examine the creation of the neighborhood itself in 1802 and how Five Points became the landing spot for Irish immigrants in the 1830s and 1840s. Through newspaper articles and reform treatises from the mid to late nineteenth century, I show how tenement living, prostitution, saloon culture, and interracial relationships all contributed to the infamy of Five Points, but that the neighborhood's reputation only reveals half the story. 1991 archaeological excavations have demonstrated the role of transnationalism and chain migration in the overcrowding of housing, and the demand by upper-class men for illicit activities in Five Points. These activities and features of Five Points contributed to the first slum expeditions and its explosion in the American media. As Five Points was the center of urban, social, and

demographic change in New York, much of the neighborhood's notoriety was actually rooted in its novelty.

Chapter two will take a deep-dive into the nature of slumming and slum literature that followed the media attention on the arrival of new immigrant groups. I show how the tourist guidebooks published between 1840 to 1873 perpetuated class boundaries and transformed Five Points into a tourist destination for middle-class slumming. In the 1850s, reform treatises reacted to the urban poor in Five Points but also drew on a voyeuristic fascination with the neighborhood as the city's underbelly, paying little attention to the lives and successes of its residents. I will argue that these texts associated crime, race, and immorality with Five Points and its immigrant residents. Photographs taken by reformers such as Jacob Riis and popular guidebooks like *New York by Gas-Light* all drew on a similar language of "dark" and "light", and "us" and "other." I will show that even the reform treatises participated in a form of slum literature and echoed the harmful language used by the emerging literary trends of city-mystery books.

The third chapter will examine how the meaning of Five Points changed in the second half of the nineteenth century, and how that reputation differed from the lived experience of the immigrant residents. Letters in the *Counsel on Emigration* reveal that European immigrants reflected differently on their life in Five Points than outsider reports. They boasted about their living conditions, the abundance of family and native traditions, as well as their daily meals. This chapter will also use research presented by Anbinder, who analyzed the savings accounts of Irish immigrants to show their surprising economic success in Five Points. The campaigns of urban reformers changed the way outsiders viewed Five Points throughout the postbellum period, but even through the cycles of progress, the media continued their characterization of Five Points as a slum.

Chapter One: The Rise of Five Points

Martin Scorsese's film, *Gangs of New York* (2001), may have gotten something right in the melodramatic vengeance story of Five Points. Despite highlighting the brutish violence and gang warfare in New York that social historians have tried to put to rest over the past few decades, Scorsese made one thing clear: Five Points was the center of racial, social, and economic change in antebellum New York.⁴⁷ Yet slums, immigrants, and crime continue to be the dominant themes of many historical accounts of the neighborhood, building on contemporary reports that saw Five Points as an adverse symptom of this change.

This chapter will address why Five Points came to receive such notoriety in the first half of the nineteenth century. Beginning with the neighborhood's creation in 1802, I use journalist and investigative reports on the area to show how tenement housing, prostitution, and interracial relationships all contributed to Five Points earning its fame as the first "slum" in America. These themes will be contested by other evidence regarding the experience of immigrant life, showing how transnational networks and commercial attractions played an equally important role in the development of Five Points as a slum and as a tourist destination for elite outsiders by the 1830s. Many of the earliest slumming parties visited Five Points for its brothels, but also out of anxiety over new racial groups and illicit activities. Over time, "native-born" Americans viewed Five Points as the focal point of immorality in New York, but this reputation reveals more about their reaction to the economic and demographic changes that swept over New York at the turn of the century.

The Creation of Five Points

Luc Sante remarked that "the layout of Manhattan's streets gives away their history."⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Martin Scorsese, *GANGS OF NEW YORK* (USA/Italy: Miramax, 2002); See Anbinder, *Five Points*.

⁴⁸ Sante, *Low Life*, 4.

The streets that came to be known as the Five Points present no exception to the urban history principle of New York. What now contains popular Chinese eateries, branches of every major commercial bank, and a pristine park was once the most crowded and feared territory in the city. Before that, it was a pond. The Collect, as the five-acre pond was known, was a “defining landmark” in eighteenth-century New York. Many New Yorkers enjoyed standing on Bunker Hill, which rose over a hundred feet above the pond, to gaze at the rising city and wildlife that surrounded the Collect (Figure 3). By the end of the eighteenth century, however, the meatpacking industry turned the beloved pocket of nature into a complete disaster. As the only area in the city where it was legal to kill livestock, slaughterhouses and tanneries transformed the Collect into a contaminated and dirty area with a stench so bad that it raised the alarm for city officials. After much debate on what to do with this empty site, proposals to turn the Collect into a city park were abandoned; the need to support New York’s growing population was more urgent, and in 1802 the Common Council announced that the pond would be filled and made ready for construction.⁴⁹



Figure 3: An engraving of the Collect, 1796. New York Public Library⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 23.

⁵⁰ “N.Y.C., Collect Pond”, New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed January 27, 2024. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e1-2bf5-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

Many neighborhoods in New York changed in the early nineteenth century as the city accommodated new demographic and industrial trends. The rise of Five Points directly reflected the growing need for housing during this period. Formerly a pond and a make-shift burial site for cow carcasses, the new area attracted significant attention from wealthy families, such as the Lorillards and the Schermerhorns, who built and rented two-and-a-half story wooden buildings to artisans, merchants, and shopkeepers who lived with their families above the storefronts. At this time, there were few distinctions in terms of occupation and class between the newly constructed neighborhood of Five Points and the surrounding areas. But as the demand for artisan store fronts were replaced by mass-production factories elsewhere in New York, tenants gradually abandoned their shops in Five Points. Transportation networks also allowed the middle and upper class to move uptown, creating a greater geographic divide between the residential neighborhood of Five Points and the expanding commercial districts in Lower Manhattan. This radical restructuring of class in the city was one factor in the creation of a slum in the center of New York.⁵¹

For this reason, Five Points may be seen as a physical manifestation of the city's transformations. Landowners quickly realized they could make much more money by subdividing single-family homes into smaller apartments, while spending almost no money to maintain them. Immigrant arrivals found the cheapest available housing in Five Points. As historian Tyler Anbinder notes, there were other poor neighborhoods in New York, but the central location and employment opportunities led many more immigrants to find a home in Five Points. From 1830 to 1855, subdivision of these buildings allowed the population of Five Points to swell from 13,570 to 25,562; foreign-born residents accounted for twenty-five and eighty-nine percent of this number, respectively. This striking jump may be explained by the enormous rise

⁵¹ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 25.

of Irish immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century. But the reasons for their settling in Five Points are more complex; a combination of subdivision and chain migration transformed the neighborhood from a once abandoned artisan district to the most famous slum in New York.⁵²

Immigrant Waves and Urban Decline



Fig 4: The Five Points intersection, ca. 1867. Collection of the New York Historical Society.

The two-and-a-half story buildings were no match for the thousands of Irish immigrants that would arrive at Five Points in the 1830s. One observer claimed that there were “half a million of people crammed into the deadly tenements, and that ten thousand children are constantly adrift in the streets.”⁵³ The decline of the image of Five Points, therefore, originated from this mass arrival of poor Irish immigrants to the neighborhood. However, with profiteering from wealthy landlords and limited upkeep of the buildings, Five Points was predestined for deterioration. As more immigrants came to Five Points, the buildings became increasingly crowded and in need of repair. Furthermore, reminders of this neighborhood’s prehistory came frequently in the smell of sewer, mud, and general waste. Therefore, much of the notoriety of

⁵² Anbinder, *Five Points*, 23-41.

⁵³ Crapsey, *The Nether Side of New York*, 134.

Five Points came from this gradual decline of the tenements, and with it, the image of twenty or so Irish men, women, and children packed into one twelve square foot bedroom as a symbol of the neighborhood.⁵⁴

In the early 1990s, archaeological digs on former Five Points grounds revealed more about the infamous housing descriptions than previously realized, showing how tenement subdivision was largely a result of transnational ties between Irish immigrants and their pre-migrant families.⁵⁵ 472 Pearl Street was purchased in 1839 for \$16,400 (equivalent to over half a million dollars today) by a wealthy Irish immigrant, Peter McLoughlin. Formerly a liquor store in the standard two-and-a-half story wooden building of the neighborhood, McLoughlin replaced it with a five-story tenement building to lease out to impoverished Irish immigrants. Tenants included McLoughlin's brother Michael and his family, who had arrived from Sligo a few years earlier. Michael brought in boarders to occupy the remaining two-bedroom apartments, who each brought four to five new boarders in their family's household. Catherine Connell, for instance, brought in five other women who were vendors, fruit dealers, and tailors. Most of the boarders were fellow Irish immigrants, but others were of English descent. By 1850, 472 Pearl Street grew in size and in occupation, with around one-hundred tenants. The next owner, William Clinton, also an Irish immigrant, constructed new tenement housing in the back of the lot in 1864. This expansion slightly increased the number of tenants residing in 472 Pearl Street, but with new waves of immigration to New York, the ethnic mix per building also became more varied over time.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Crapsey, *The Nether Side of New York*, 134.

⁵⁵ This work is from the GSA Foley Square Project, which included a dig of a two-block radius in Lower Manhattan, comprising of Park, Baxter, and Worth Streets. Their first project was done on the former eighteenth-century African Burial Grounds which have been heavily researched. See Rebecca Yamin, "Introduction: Becoming New York: The Five Points Neighborhood," *Historical Archaeology* 35, no. 3 (2001), 1-5.

⁵⁶ Rebecca Yamin, "Lurid Tales and Homely Stories of New York's Notorious Five Points," *Historical Archaeology* 32, no. 1 (1998), 78.

The examination of 472 Pearl Street allows a more nuanced look at the living arrangements and slow urban decline in Five Points. It serves as just one example of how landowners benefited from continuously subdividing their buildings, but also of the role that transnational ties and chain migration played in the constant movement of poor immigrant families to Five Points.⁵⁷ In fact, Anbinder has estimated that 56% of all Irish immigrants arrived in New York with at least one family member.⁵⁸ Many parents left their children behind until they could afford their emigration.⁵⁹ Partly thanks to the sewage and landfill which was built over in 1864, excavations from this building show the melange of household goods, beverages, and evidence of needlework and trades that Five Pointers used to supplement their income. Traditional Italian and Irish diets were also inferred from these remains, and they brought pottery decorated with native religious figures.⁶⁰ From the outsider's point of view, the tenement buildings are remembered as a symbol of the slum in Five Points. However, archaeological excavations impart stories from the immigrant perspective, how they maintained ties to their homeland community, mother tongue, culture, and religion.

Slumming and Tenement Living

While these tenements housed the multi-ethnic and working-class communities that emerged in the 1830s, their unsanitary and crowded conditions remained central to how Five Points was depicted and remembered. The buckled buildings, energetic streets, and inescapable stench contributed to an idea, at least externally, that the working class was a more visible and powerful force in New York. As the population of Five Points doubled between 1830 and 1855, journalistic slumming expeditions became more frequent. Typically, journalists would be

⁵⁷ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 40.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 40.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 40.

⁶⁰ Yamin, "Lurid Tales", 80-81.

accompanied by a policeman to walk through (with unannounced authority) the bedrooms and cellars inside Five Points tenements. A desire to socially register this growing population may have motivated many journalists to visit and write about Five Points. Perhaps slumming provided a sense of comfort for the middle class to link the shocking outward appearance of the tenements with the immigrant residents inside of them. It was not until the 1850s that slumming expeditions were also motivated by reform efforts. It will be seen later that slumming, even driven by a concern for the poor, romanticized and dramatized poverty in the same fashion as journalists.

Just a three minute walk from the flashing lights of Broadway, Cassius Clay, a Kentucky-born politician and abolitionist, turned down the corner of Anthony Street at half past ten. It was cold, but the “insensible” women of Five Points still stood outside with bare shoulders. An officer took Clay past “murdering alley,” which “slept a thousand wretched outcasts” and knocked on a door that was opened by a woman with a blanket over her shoulders. The room was “covered with human beings,” both black and white, sleeping so close together that Clay could hardly find room to walk. Their bedding was barely a heap of rags on the floor, and every subsequent room he entered was smaller and more densely packed. Clay “never before had any idea of poverty in cities” and did not “dream that human beings could be abandoned to the wretchedness” which he saw there.⁶¹

This 1845 *New York Times* excerpt demonstrates how the crowded living conditions of the new immigrant population were a central attraction in Five Points. Slum-goers came explicitly to visit the tenement buildings and marveled in curiosity, pity, and horror at the sight of a slum just a few minutes’ walk from one of the most fashionable districts in New York. Clay’s description of just one tenement building is echoed in hundreds of similar reports in the news. Journalists often entered the private living spaces at night time in Five Points to document the

⁶¹ Cassius Clay, “The Five Points”, *The Baltimore Sun* (Aug 20, 1845).

lives of the urban poor. They took part in some of the first official slum expeditions in the nineteenth century. Their publications contributed to the sensationalized perception of Five Points as a dangerous slum, and reinforced the public perception of Five Points as a place segregated along class lines.

In the midst of the journalistic slumming boom, the *New York Times* published a regular series titled “Walks Among the New-York Poor.” In 1853, one edition featured the residents of a tenement building on Orange Street. The journalists sat down with a few Italian and Irish residents, discussing business, their lodgings, and their neighbors. One Italian family, who lived on the upper floor of the building, were well-dressed and “superior” for their class. Without speaking English, they managed to earn a few shillings a day as organ-grinders and piano players. Two Irish women lived next door, who made a living by stitching together rags and reselling them for a few extra bucks. The Italian commented that their neighbors were “very dacent people, them forrenners...they niver makes no noise at all, or disturbance. They certainly niver drink, and they are as quiet as lambs on the Sundays.” The journalists ventured down to the cellar of the building, which was “packed full again of people, with a nauseating stench about them.” The floor was entirely Irish, but they were cheerful and “ready to give and take a joke.” Despite the civil and insightful conversations, the authors closed this piece with a remark on the children in the building: “ignorant, unguided, passionate, who shall poison New-York.”⁶²

This edition of “Walks Among the New York Poor” contrasts Clay’s report and the typical journalistic slumming expeditions of the nineteenth century. Many depictions of Five Points rarely included conversations with the residents, or even a desire to understand their way of life beyond the gruesome appearance of tenement living. While Clay’s report satisfied his own preconceived notions of the tenements, this article gave a more in-depth exploration of how the

⁶²“Walks Among the New-York Poor: The Organ Grinders”, *New York Daily Times* (Feb 11, 1853).

tenants viewed their own living condition. The Italian and Irish families depicted in the story were willing to discuss their journey to New York, their expectations, and hopes for their children. The Italian family viewed their Irish neighbors with respect and courtesy, while subtly acknowledging and disproving the stereotypes held against them. In the notoriously crowded cellars, the Irish remained lighthearted and prayed daily, as reported by the Italians living above.⁶³ On one level, this piece testifies to the ethnic ties that bound together the European immigrants in the Five Points tenements. However, the closing remark of the author showed the degree to which journalistic slumming in Five Points was still self-fulfilling. An overarching need to confirm their own beliefs of the immigrant class as “poisonous” dominated the headlines on Five Points.



Fig 5: “The Unrestricted Dumping-Ground: direct from the slums of Europe daily”⁶⁴

When the Irish settled in Five Points in the 1830s and 1840s, Five Points became identifiable as an urban slum. Through a mixture of cheap housing, subdivision, and ethnic ties, Five Points appeared more degraded with each new wave of European immigrants that arrived. The gradual geographic divide between these foreigners and the American-born New Yorkers

⁶³ “Walks Among the New-York Poor.”

⁶⁴ Louis Dalrymple, “The Unrestricted Dumping-Ground” (New York: Judge Pub. Co., 1903). New York Public Library Catalog.

allowed the slum to be more of a tourist attraction than simply another residential neighborhood. The media attention to their foreign patronage and living standards intensified the geographic division and the notoriety of the neighborhood, but the linear story of decline is more complex than many journalists let on. Five Points allowed these immigrants to be close to work and their community, and they viewed their experiences more positively than outsiders did. While crowdedness and unsanitary living are certainly measures of poor conditions, the investigative reports did not reveal the entire picture.

Prostitution and Saloon Life

In the 1820s, the waterfront district contained most of New York's brothels, serving a mixed clientele of sailors and other travelers. By 1830, however, Five Points became the city's first red-light district. Scholars have speculated why a commercial sex market found its way to the neighborhood, perhaps for its central location near City Hall or for its relative tolerance of delinquency. Five Points also contained many of New York's rowdiest saloons and dives, which facilitated an early glimpse of a growing heterosexual leisure culture in the nineteenth century.⁶⁵ The subsequent rise of cross-social interactions from prostitution and saloon life led to paradoxical developments in the neighborhood. On one hand, it attracted a type of commercial slumming among elite, white men. But it also brought further criticism against Five Points in the press as the center of illicit sexual and moral activities.

The lower-class dives were beloved by both locals and elite men: pianos, harps, violins, and drums entertained guests, while rifle target games, rat-baiting, cards, dominoes, and dog vs. raccoon contests ensured that both drinks and money hardly went to waste in Five Points. These

⁶⁵ Sante, *Low Life*, 106; In the 1830s, leisure for middle-class New Yorkers was primarily homosocial in nature, meaning there was a separation in male and female social spaces. In the 1880s, the rise of heterosocial leisurely spaces was more available for the greater middle-class. Kathy Peiss argues that this illuminated a greater cultural shift towards a more liberated view on gender, sex, and female self-expression. See Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*.

establishments were unusually progressive for New York in the mid-nineteenth century. Tourists were often shocked at the sight of both male and female employees and customers, who could be seen drinking, dancing, and smoking pipes together. The city's finest African-American musicians often entertained the guests, too.⁶⁶

Saloons and dives were central to the social life of Five Pointers, and the diversity of these spaces reflected the diversity of the neighborhood itself. In the 1830s and 1840s, however, this type of scene was rare for New York. Social historians have come to understand leisurely spaces as a "vessel" through which the working-class articulated different values and identities. Both historians Chad Heap and Kathy Peiss argue that a heterosocial leisure culture in New York only started to form in the 1880s, when working-class women exercised greater autonomy in social amusements such as dance halls and nickelodeons.⁶⁷ With this context, saloon culture in Five Points was particularly extraordinary for its early demonstration of racial and gender boundary crossing in New York. Saloons and dives represented a liminal space for Five Pointers, which facilitated the same effect for middle- and upper-class Americans. However, at a time when leisure was still primarily homosocial in nature, Five Points was criticized for fostering a dangerous culture that was hospitable to vice.

Five Points' reputation as a red-light district was known nation-wide. While the saloons primarily served local Irish and English immigrants, their notoriety made them popular slumming destinations for outsiders. Charles Dickens made Pete William's saloon on Baxter Street particularly famous in his description of Five Points, which in 1848, appeared in the Kentucky press. Writing for the *Louisville Morning Courier*, one visitor recalled the distinct smell of gin, onions, and tobacco inside his establishment. In the back of the bar sat several

⁶⁶ Sante, *Low Life*, 106.

⁶⁷ Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 4-8; Heap, *Slumming*, 16.

women — “outcasts of the Old World.” They had thick and raspy voices, offering their services to each visiting man that entered Pete’s saloon. Among the “burning supply of alcoholic poisons” was whiskey and brandy, but seeing how the men and women were intermingled and intoxicated with blood-shot eyes, this visitor found himself repulsed at the sight of the whole place: “it is disgusting to think of, and revolting to see.”⁶⁸ This account used Pete’s saloon as an example of the prostitution, vice, and misbehavior that existed in Five Points more broadly. But to view prostitution as a symptom of the slum would not be entirely accurate. The archeological excavations in Five Points also showed how prostitution and saloon life served residents who lived outside of the neighborhood.

For Mr. Donahue’s prostitute house on 12 Orange Street, business was booming. It was estimated that as many as 745 waitresses serving the saloons and taverns in Five Points also belonged to various brothels that existed along Orange and Water Street in the 1840s.⁶⁹ By 1850, one prostitute could expect to see four clients a day in New York. Mr. Donahue’s basement saloon looked like an unrecognizable world in the heart of Five Points, but it was not so unfamiliar for his elite clientele. Nighttime at 12 Orange Street was always an extravagant party — dancing, drinking, feasting were expected features of his establishment. The women had tea parties with an imported Chinese porcelain set. The meals served a large party of guests, with roasts, beef steaks, and clams on commemorative war plates of General Lafayette, and punch on the side (served in cut-glass bowls and matching cups). In local dives there was a no-glass rule and ale was standard, but on 12 Orange Street they drank wine in tumblers (with coasters, of

⁶⁸ “A Visit to the Five Points”, *Louisville Morning Courier* (Dec 9, 1848); Pete William’s saloon, also known as Almack’s, was written about by Dickens in *American Notes*. Williams was African American, and popularly known among locals as a great businessman and proprietor, owning a team of race horses and employing some of the best black musicians in the city. His saloon and dancehall were popularized by Dickens’s visit to Five Points, and they were known to keep customers safe from robbery inside the establishment. See Paul Preston, “Reminiscences of a Man About Town: On the ‘Five Points’,” *New York Clipper* (October 3, 1868).

⁶⁹ Sante, *Low Life*, 107.

course). For the nearby politicians, the drinks might have been served out of a pitcher decorated with the motto, “E Pluribus Unum,” and an American eagle.⁷⁰

A deeper look at prostitution in Five Points contrasts the melancholic narrative seen in the Louisville press. 12 Orange Street primarily catered to their elite, wealthy, male customers. While Mr. Donohue’s establishment seemed other-worldly in the center of the most well-known slum in America, it in fact facilitated another means of slumming in Five Points. As long as there was a continuous demand amongst rich clientele or traveling visitors, prostitution was profitable in Five Points and so was the mechanism by which outsiders experienced sexual escapades, rambunctious drinking, gambling, or cage-fight betting. The strong presence of prostitution may tell a story of vice, but it speaks more strongly to the environment of illegal fantasy that attracted such cross-social and sexual interactions. These voyeuristic exchanges accounted for a large portion of slumming in its early days, but for others who had grievances with the mere existence of prostitution, moralizing the women who served in brothels and the men who drank alongside them was reason enough to venture into the parameters of Five Points.

Racial Integration

Helen Campbell was one of many social and industrial reformers who sought to investigate and curtail the presence of prostitution in Five Points. However, her writing suggests that interracial relationships also contributed to the notoriety of Five Points. Her 1896 book on New York, *Darkness and Daylight*, is representative of another form of slumming that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century; motivated by a concern for the poor and an assertion of Protestant moral reasoning, Campbell visited and wrote about some of the saloons and brothels of Five Points. There, a “mud-gutter band in front of one of the dance-halls was making discordant music, while children of all ages... jostled each other in a rude attempt at dancing.”

⁷⁰ Yamin, “Lurid Tales”, 82-3; Sante, *Low Life*, 106.

She witnessed a group of “bare-headed colored women, in soiled calico dresses, with sleeves rolled up” who stopped “before entering the brothels, to join with rough-looking sailors in a ‘break-down’.” Both “white and blacks mingled indiscriminately” to the rhythm of a drum in a “filthy” saloon, while other girls smoked pipes in the crowded room.⁷¹ Campbell, locking eyes with a young black girl outside the saloon, invited her to a gospel meeting, who then confessed that “Why I’s a sinner, I is; you don’ want to such as I is; I ain’t good ‘nuf to go to no meetin’.” Campbell replied, “Christ came to save sinners, however bad. He came for the lost.”⁷²

Just outside “Hell Gate,” the infamous entrance to the Five Points intersection, Campbell spotted a tall, slender, and drunk woman standing against a lamp-post — seemingly her third or fourth befallen subject in a night. Her eyes were purple and face bruised by the assaults of her “huge negro companion,” standing just next to her, “who held her as his slave.”⁷³ Campbell approached the woman, telling her the story of Jesus (bringing tears to her eyes), and took her to the Florence Night Mission. Campbell told her black partner to pray for her life, and they shortly arrived at the mission via automobile. Upon entrance, the woman remarked, “You will be proud of me some day.” Campbell wrote that she did not have high hopes for her, but like many other women who have supposedly sinned in the slums of Five Points, the woman became a faithful Christian due to the work of the ladies at the mission.⁷⁴

Five Points was central to the discussion of how to mitigate interracial relationships. Campbell’s writing is a testament to the nineteenth-century views on interracial sex and socializing in New York. She, along with fellow reporters and missionaries, took part in a discourse that isolated race, sexuality, criminality, and poverty from other abolitionist debates.

⁷¹ Helen Campbell, *Darkness and Daylight, or Lights and Shadows of New York Life* (New York: A.D. Worthington & Co., 1896), 238.

⁷² Campbell, *Darkness and Daylight*, 238.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 239.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 240.

The idea of racial integration was an increasing fear of conservative religious reformers, who worried about the destruction of New York's racial and social order. Abolitionists saw Five Points as a threat to their case, and avoided public response to the complicated racial dynamic in the area. Politicians experienced continued anxiety over the frequent violent encounters between the Irish and black population in Five Points, which erupted into riots in 1834 and 1863 over wage and draft conflicts. Despite varied views on race in Five Points, these riots instigated a wave of public outcry over the problem of interracial marriage in multi-ethnic neighborhoods, viewing racial integration as a "problem of the lower classes."⁷⁵

The Irish and blacks in Five Points competed for low-wage, unskilled jobs in the area, but as the Irish grew in numbers and began to dominate the neighborhood, they slowly pushed out the black population from residential, social, and working spaces in Five Points. In 1825, African Americans represented fourteen percent of the Five Points population, but by the time the Irish settled there in the 1830s and 40s, their number dwindled to three or four percent.⁷⁶ By the 1850s, the Irish had succeeded in securing a significant portion of unskilled labor in the area, but in occupying the jobs that were designated to the social and economic standing of blacks, the Irish received much of the prejudice that was held against the black population for so long. The Irish were often called "white n*ggers" and blacks were labeled "smoked Irish." This black-Irish dynamic fueled new notions of how race was connected to poverty in Five Points. Figure 6 shows an 1866 physiognomic drawing of an Anglo-Saxon and Irish woman side-by-side. Her rugged, cartoon-like face contrasts to the marked civility of the Anglo-Saxon woman. As the

⁷⁵ Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadows of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 247.

⁷⁶ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 41. Anbinder asserts that it is possible that the census underestimated the number of black residents in Five Points. "Cow Bay," one of the most densely populated blocks by African Americans in Five Points, for example, seems to not have been counted in 1855.

Irish made Five Points home, their proximity to blacks, poverty, prostitution, and murder all factored into the emerging characterizations of the Irish as sub-white.⁷⁷

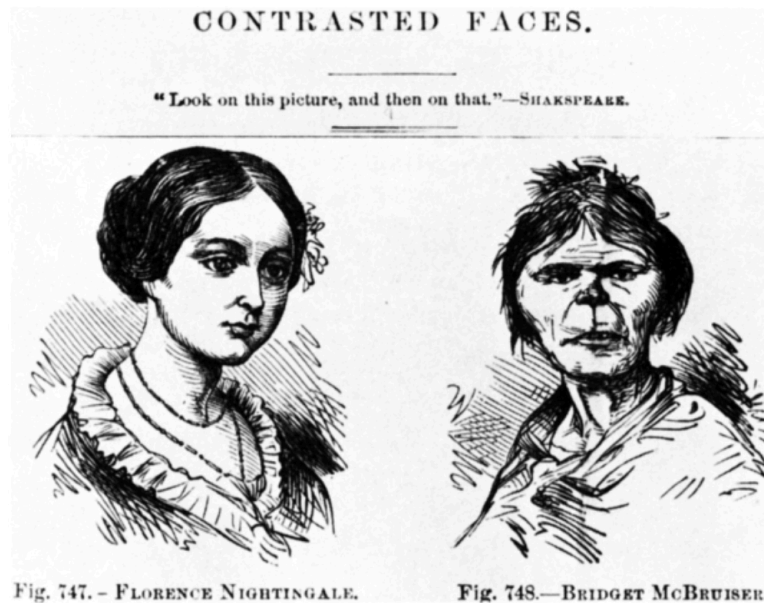


Fig 6: An Anglo-Saxon and Irish woman side-by-side⁷⁸

The relationship between the Irish and blacks, who shared these social spaces was certainly unstable and precarious. Violent conflict was not unusual in the release of working-class tensions, but Campbell's report on the intermingling, dancing, and sexual relationships between white and blacks in Five Points was also based in fact. George Foster, in *New York by Gas-Light*, remarked that African Americans in Five Points often had white mistresses, and were held in high regard by young girls. In 1826, the first known appearance of Five Points in the press made note of the interracial social scene, and also demanded immediate police action against the vices of the neighborhood: "in and about these rum holes both sexes, and almost every variety of age and colour, drinking, swearing and fighting...the wretched appearance of the place, the immorality of the inhabitants, etc. would hardly be believed if not witnessed."⁷⁹ The interracial nature of the neighborhood played a central role in the growing

⁷⁷ Harris, *In the Shadows of Slavery*, 254-255.

⁷⁸ Samuel R. Wells, *New Physiognomy*, (New York, 1866).

⁷⁹ "CORNELIUS" to the Editor.

notoriety of Five Points; observation of interracial socializing in Five Points constantly surfaced in the headlines for decades since, sparking outrage, calls for change, and ultimately, curiosity to witness these fantastical scenes for themselves.⁸⁰ By 1850, the connection between integrated social spaces and poverty was firmly established in popular minds.

Conclusion

After Five Points made its first appearance in the press, it became one of the most studied neighborhoods in America.⁸¹ Despite the overwhelming media attention, articles asserted that the written word could not do justice to the sight of poverty and suffering present in the neighborhood. Throughout the next couple of decades, Five Points continued to erupt in the press, causing city officials to demolish blocks of tenements, build “Paradise Park”, widen streets, and put up lamp posts in an attempt to make the area more safe and welcoming. Some journalists even called for the removal of Five Points entirely, since so many people avoided the area that it affected nearby businesses. But their efforts were unsuccessful; buildings continued to rot and squatters planted themselves in alleyways as immigration caused tenements to be increasingly crowded.⁸² By 1850, it seemed like Five Points’s fate was sealed as a slum.

While the poverty endured by many Five Points residents cannot be denied, contemporary media accounts show that the notoriety of the neighborhood also came from its novelty. Five Points represented the convergence of urban restructuring, immigration, prostitution, and racial integration — making it central to the study of social and urban history of nineteenth-century New York. As archaeologist Rebecca Yamin observed in her 2001 report on Five Points, “the multi-racial, multi-ethnic character of New York was born in this period and the

⁸⁰ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 16.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 16.

⁸² *Ibid*, 27.

Five Points neighborhood may be seen as a crucible for its development.”⁸³ The progressive character of Five Points was certainly not appreciated during its time. Yet, the very characteristics and individuals in Five Points that were condemned for moral degradation paradoxically led to its attraction. They played a pivotal role in the emergence of tourism and slumming in New York.

⁸³ Yamin, “Introduction: Becoming New York,” 1.

Chapter Two: Slumming and Slum Literature

I saw no reason, when I wrote this book, why the dregs of life should not serve the purpose of a moral as well as the froth and cream...it seemed to me that to draw a knot of such associates in crime as it really did exist, to paint them in all their deformity, in all their wretchedness, in all the squalid misery of their lives; to show them as they really were...it appeared to me that to do this would be to attempt something which was needed, and which might be of service to society.

– Charles Dickens, preface to *Oliver Twist*

When Charles Dickens published *Oliver Twist* (1838) and later, *American Notes* (1842), he did so as a self-professed moralist. Exploring the unsettling way of life of the urban poor in London, and again in Five Points, Dickens intended to “serve the purpose of a moral” by unearthing the reality of the slum-dweller “as they really were.”⁸⁴ Yet the publication of *American Notes* marked the advent of a new literary genre that would be swept away by the rest of the Western world. To depict the bustling, underground urban scene of New York “as it is” became the purpose of a large group of American authors and reformers beginning in the 1840s and 1850s, paying specific attention to Five Points. The resulting genre of urban sketchbooks, tourist guidebooks, and reform treatises contributed to a public perception of Five Points as a place of crime, immorality, and darkness. Moreover, by observing and documenting the life of the urban poor, these authors promoted slumming to a wider audience of middle-class Americans.

Both contemporary and modern scholars have acknowledged the role of Dickens in the literary and social trend of observing and documenting the urban poor. In a 1900 edition of *The National Review* one writer called him “the first modern exponent of slum-life” and attributed his moralistic profession to the Victorian convention of his time.⁸⁵ Robert Dowling, author of *Slumming in New York: From the Waterfront to Mythic Harlem*, also argued that Dickens’s

⁸⁴ Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (London: Richard Bentley, 1838), vi-vii.

⁸⁵ Jane Findlater, “The Slum Movement in Fiction,” *The National Review* 207, no. 35 (1900), 448.

“blistering chapter on the conditions of Five Points...paradoxically [made it] New York’s most alluring tourist attraction.”⁸⁶ While Dickens set the convention for slum literature in the nineteenth century, he also drew enormous attention to Five Points as the focal point of the poor urban experience in America. Throughout the following decades, however, slum literature grew in its breadth and depth, establishing a new set of motivations and styles for representing the other.

The language, content, and purpose of slum literature on Five Points will be the focus of this chapter. I explore two groups of publications that evolved in the second half of the nineteenth century. First, the tourist guidebook and urban sketchbook genre which took shape between the 1850s and 1870s. These travel narratives and journalistic urban exposés were highly circulated to the New York middle class, and were part of an emerging style of literary realism. Authors such as G.G. Foster, James D. McCabe, and Matthew Hale Smith led their readers through a journey of New York, telling the story of Five Points and its residents “as it is.” They acted as witnesses of Five Points’ nightlife and crime scenes, and reported on the daily habits and behaviors of the immigrant residents. Most of these authors included prefaces to their travels, explicitly stating their commitment to authenticity and moralism, while providing a warning to their readers of the content that lay ahead. These stories acutely recognized the geography of New York in terms of “dark” and “light,” and I argue that in dealing with space and morality, slum literature carved a distinct sense of otherness onto their immigrant subjects. Moreover, they popularized slum expeditions in Five Points as a leisurely phenomenon for middle-class Americans.

In the second half of this chapter, I explore the publications on Five Points by a group of

⁸⁶ Robert Dowling, *Slumming in New York: From the Waterfront to Mythic Harlem* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 4.

reformers and missionaries between the 1850s and 1890s. Starting around the 1850s, Five Points was central to the discussion on poverty and reform in New York. As missionaries began their work in the neighborhood, they published a significant body of material detailing their progress towards invading the slum. I argue that the so-called moral crusaders, reformists, and muckrakers of this generation also participated in a form of slumming and slum literature.⁸⁷ Although these sources have traditionally been excluded from the discussion of slumming in New York, doing so reveals insight into how the middle class responded to the increased visibility of the urban poor in Five Points. Mission reports from the Five Points House of Industry, *The Old Brewery and the Mission House at the Five Points* (1854), and Jacob Riis's popularly read *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) aimed to expose and improve the living conditions of the urban poor, but reinforced a view of the immigrant population as morally deviant, problematic, and dangerous to their Anglo-Saxon readers. The documentary style of Riis relied on invasive and unflattering methods to investigate and depict the immigrant residents of Five Points. While their methods admitted them to the world they hoped to fix, these publications intensified class division and projected strong moral presuppositions onto the residents of Five Points.

The Urban Sketchbook and Travel Narratives of Five Points

“Descending through a rickety door-way,” wrote James McCabe in 1872, “we passed into a room about sixteen feet square and eight feet high.” In the cellar of a building in Five Points, McCabe described a lodging house, a common living space for immigrant families who recently arrived to New York (Figure 7). Many of these houses were owned and operated by immigrants themselves. In this case, McCabe described the Irish proprietress, “an old hag, who had lost the greater part of her nose, and whose face was hidden by the huge frill of the cap she wore.” Glancing at the rest of the room, which alone housed more than twenty occupants, McCabe

⁸⁷ The work and ideologies of the Five Points missions will be discussed in Chapter Three.

observed it was “more than half in the shadow, and the air was so dense and foul that [he] could scarcely breathe.”⁸⁸



Figure 7: “A Five Points Lodging Cellar”⁸⁹

To describe those living in “lights” and “shadows” was the central theme of McCabe’s guide to New York, along with the other writers of the urban sketchbook and tourist guidebook genres between the 1850s and 1870s. They aimed to provide a walking guide and illustration of New York “as they see it,” but unlike the must-sees and top restaurants of today’s travel tips, they classified their guide and history of New York in terms of social strata and crime. After a brief overview of Manhattan’s population and size, Matthew Hale Smith declared in the introduction of *Sunshine and Shadow in New York* (1868) what he saw as the distinguishing facts of the city: “It costs half a million annually to light the city. Two thousand policemen guard the city...Seven hundred thousand dollars a year are dispersed by the authorities in public charity. Three hundred religious and benevolent societies collect and pay out annually the sum of over two and a half million.”⁹⁰ McCabe, in *Lights and Shadows of New York* (1872) sought to explore

⁸⁸ McCabe, *Lights and Shadows*, 408.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 407.

⁹⁰ Matthew Hale Smith, *Sunshine and Shadow in New York* (Hartford: J.B. Burr & Co., 1868), 25-26.

the “lavish displays of wealth” and the “hideous depths of poverty” in the city.⁹¹ G.G. Foster, in *New York by Gas-Light* (1850) aimed to uncover “the sad realities that go to make up the lower stratum.”⁹² Amidst the striking changes of New York — the rising buildings, growing population, higher power and more appalling poverty — these authors saw it necessary to provide a revised guide to the increasingly overwhelming city. Yet the terms and style of their story-telling centered around the visibility of class and class divisions.

As the industrial and urban landscape of New York changed, there was an increasing need to reconstruct, in order to comprehend, the changing social and moral geography of the city. In the mid-nineteenth century, many middle- and upper-class Americans left the downtown area for larger, suburban houses further uptown. As this shift took place, Five Points gradually stood out as a visible center of poverty and crime.⁹³ The outflow of this group not only separated the rich and poor classes in terms of geography, but it also enabled definitive moral, social, and racial boundaries to be drawn. Despite the apparent visibility of poverty in Five Points, middle-class New Yorkers still experienced anxiety over what was *invisible* to them: dens, thieves, gangs, homicide, and underground saloons. While the popular media in New York tried to make sense of this dichotomy (as discussed in Chapter One), tourist guidebooks allowed for a more entertaining, digestible, and often comforting way of interpreting what could and could *not* be seen. Therefore, describing Five Points through the perspective of class allowed the middle class to experience and understand these boundaries for themselves.

Revolutionized travel networks and publishing industries also led to the demand and success of tourist guidebooks. The first steamboat tourist circuit was created along the Hudson River Valley in 1822, making travel to New York City more accessible than ever for middle-class

⁹¹ McCabe, *Lights and Shadows*, 14.

⁹² Foster, *New York by Gas-Light*, 5.

⁹³ Dowling, *Slumming in New York*, 17.

and foreign visitors.⁹⁴ Cheaper manufacturing led to unprecedented growth in the printing and publishing industries, allowing products such as guidebooks to be more streamlined, well-indexed, and illustrative for the general public.⁹⁵ While industrialization provided more networks for a dispersed population to travel to Five Points, these guidebooks intended to enlighten the potential visitor of its pleasures and moral dangers.

Speaking to this audience, McCabe, Foster, and Smith vowed in the authenticity and educational premise of their work. McCabe wrote “to those who intend visiting New York, whether they come as strangers, or as persons familiar with it” and told the reader that “an honest effort has been made” to present “a fair description of the dangers to which visitors and citizens are alike exposed.”⁹⁶ He forewarned of the dangers of touring Five Points alone, as he himself was accompanied by the police. Foster stated that his purpose of writing is to “be fully in possession of all the *facts*... and to avoid the dryness of mere statistic or the tedious pomposity of a parliamentary report.”⁹⁷ In other words, he sought to appeal to the senses and moral principles of his readers, painting a picture of Five Points that was both alluring, and seemingly informative.

By describing themselves as truth-seekers, the authors signaled that they could serve as reliable eyes of the reader. This promoted what historian Chad Heap calls “armchair slumming,” or the ability to partake in slumming from the comfort of their home.⁹⁸ Through sensationalized and entertaining writing, it was as if the readers were actually *in* Five Points. For those who wished to visit the neighborhood, Foster explained how to safely venture through Five Points, offering locations of the nearest gas-lights and police posts, as indicated in the title. The explicit

⁹⁴ Richard Gassan, “The First American Tourist Guidebooks: Authorship and the Print Culture of the 1820s”, *Book History* 8 (2005): 51-74.

⁹⁵ Gassan, “The First American Tourist Guidebook”, 59.

⁹⁶ McCabe, *Lights and Shadows*, 14.

⁹⁷ Foster, *New York by Gas-Light*, 52.

⁹⁸ Heap, *Slumming*, 21.

incitement to go slumming in Five Points separated the tourist guidebooks from the general press during this period. It shows that by the 1850s and 1860s, slumming was already growing to be a middle-class, leisurely activity.

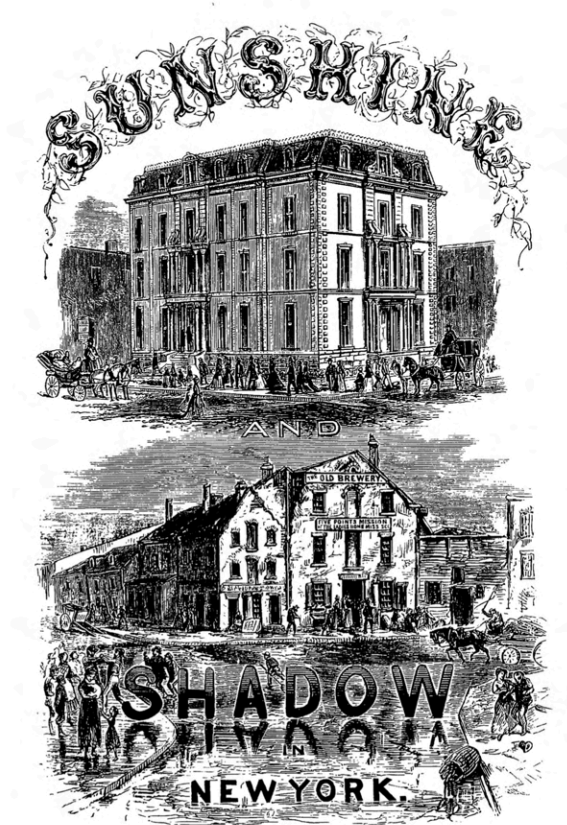


Fig 8: The cover of Smith's *Sunshine and Shadow in New York*, featuring the Old Brewery of Five Points

The language of dark and light is a predominant theme across the genre of slum literature. Not only was this written in the titles themselves, but it applied to both literal and metaphorical descriptions of the atmosphere and subjects of Five Points. Foster claimed that the addition of a street light in Five Points “has greatly improved the character of the whole location,” but most of the neighborhood is “little less dark, gloomy and terrible than the grave itself.”⁹⁹ Compared to his description of Broadway, “with its gay throng and flashing lights beaming from a thousand

⁹⁹ Foster, *New York by Gas-Light*, 53.

palace-like shop-fronts,” Five Points was singularly characterized as a place of darkness and terror.

In fact, it is difficult to find a description of a man or woman who was *not* labeled with a similar word. Everything in Five Points existed under a shadow: the cellars and basements in which the residents lived, worked, and danced, as well as their souls, respectability, and mannerisms. For instance, the “thieves” and “gamblers” who spent their time in oyster saloons were said to “burrow in their secret holes and dens all day, and only venture out at night. They are obscene night-birds who flit and howl and hoot by night, and whose crimes and abominations make them shun the light of day...because day is hateful to them.”¹⁰⁰ Slum literature expanded on the idea that physical darkness attracted and hid criminal activity. The animalistic description of these men characterized Five Points residents as not merely subhuman, but unworthy of the light of day, as lightness is inhospitable to vice and destruction.

Foster continued to describe some of the women and girls of Five Points, “all of course prostitutes,” who possessed a “sang froid at which the devils would stand aghast with horror.”¹⁰¹ The darkness, therefore, corresponded to not only their underground living and the lower strata to which the residents belonged, but their morality as well. As these authors toured through the “Lights and Shadows” of New York, they encoded a sense of moral attributes onto the geography of the city itself. The idea of a moral geography was even referenced by Foster with regards to Five Points, acknowledging the way New York could be classified in terms of its physical, but also social and religious differences.¹⁰² They promoted a view of the immigrant residents and their way of life as inseparable from the moral attributes of their impoverished lives.

¹⁰⁰ Foster, *New York by Gas-Light*, 55.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 54.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 57.

The concept of physical darkness was also used to elicit an emotional sense of fear and danger from readers. These authors constantly warned of the temptations and pleasures that may be found in Five Points, hidden in the bars and dance halls of predators and prostitutes. McCabe claimed that there were “underground passages...which were kept secret from all but professional criminals,” expanding on the idea that the vice of Five Points was not only a danger to its visitors, but spread far beyond the neighborhood blocks.¹⁰³ Alcohol was most often used as an example of temptation and destruction. Irish immigrants were thought to be heavy, usually rambunctious drinkers, and this kind of stereotype was marketed in the urban sketchbook drama. “Liquor,” Foster wrote, makes a man “ready for anything.” After more drinking and dancing, he “loses what little human sense and precaution he is endowed...of course if he has any money or valuables on his person he is completely robbed.”¹⁰⁴ These stories related to contemporary evangelical messages that saw poverty as a kind of physical and moral contagion.¹⁰⁵ By translating the temptations and moral dangers of alcohol into a scene that he had witnessed in Five Points, Foster further separated the boundaries between middle-class evangelical harmony, and the dangerous urban poor.

Prostitution and licentiousness was seen as another danger among the poor and irreligious. Compared to the regrettable mistake of a drunken night out, prostitution was viewed as a permanent act of the unsaved. All three guidebooks discussed the horrors of prostitution at length in their section on Five Points, given its infamy as a red-light district. While Foster declared that an examination of the remedies of infidelity and prostitution was outside the bounds of his book, he included a detailed anecdote on a particular group of Canadian immigrant

¹⁰³ McCabe, *Lights and Shadows*, 401.

¹⁰⁴ Foster, *New York by Gas-Light*, 54.

¹⁰⁵ Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1989-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1987), 66.

women. These women, numbering in the teens, supposedly killed their infants and left for Five Points to escape imprisonment. Becoming prostitutes in Five Points, Foster characterized them as morally insane, diabolical, and “seldom saved.” Moreover, “after a woman once enters a house of prostitutes and leads the life of all who dwell there, *it is too late*...her fate is fixed.”¹⁰⁶ Through the catchy and mysterious tone of the tourist guidebook genre, Foster imposed a similar moralistic commentary as Dickens. However, he also painted Five Points as a neighborhood which attracted criminal immigrants and their illegal activities.

While these guidebooks are littered with scenes and messages about the temptation of prostitution, they condemned its act strictly upon the immigrant woman, rather than the traveling customer or “victim.” Smith referenced the thousands of girls between the age of twelve and eighteen, who “tramp the streets...fill the low dance houses, and wait and tend in low drinking-saloons” for their prospective visitor.¹⁰⁷ Foster also spoke of the prostitutes as “robbing her devotees.”¹⁰⁸ Although archaeological evidence showed that white, upper-class men were the primary customers of prostitution in Five Points, the tourist guidebooks neglected the degree of social boundary crossing in the commercial sex market. By displacing any responsibility on behalf of the wealthy man, these authors could further distance themselves and any other slum-goers from the immigrant population they encountered.

In addition to nineteenth-century conceptualizations of sexuality and prostitution, slum literature reveals one aspect of how immigrants were racialized and stereotyped in America. Heap argued that slumming was an essential framework with which middle- and upper-class New Yorkers enforced their own sexual and racial status.¹⁰⁹ One way that slum literature

¹⁰⁶ Stansell, *City of Women*, 62.

¹⁰⁷ Smith, *Sunshine and Shadow*, 208.

¹⁰⁸ Foster, *New York by Gas-Light*, 7.

¹⁰⁹ Heap, *Slumming*, 3.

subordinated the racial status of Five Pointers (despite their obvious ethnic diversity), was by conveying the sense that they had shared, criminal and pitiful characteristics. Foster described the black population of Five Points as overwhelming and forceful in the neighborhood, not only in sheer number but in their ability to “bear brutalization better than whites.” He described Cow Bay, a cul-de-sac known for crime and a significant black population, as the “battle-field of the negroes and the police,” associating a particular race of people with an already sensationalized monument of crime in New York. But he goes on, labeling them as “savage, sullen, reckless dogs” who have both wives and mistresses, and exert a sexual appeal to the white girls in the area.¹¹⁰

A similar effect can be found in the description of the Jewish population of Five Points, who were primarily owners of commercial and residential buildings in the 1850s.¹¹¹ In describing the physical attributes of the Jewish race, Foster said it is the “hook of the nose which betrays the Israelite as the human kite, formed to be feared, hated and despised, yet to prey upon mankind.”¹¹² These guidebooks propagated visual narratives which were harmful and resistant to the growing ethnic population. For the readers who did not engage in slumming themselves, it generated an imaginative and stereotypical response to race while containing it to a specific neighborhood.

Finally, in listing the population of Five Points by race, these authors had a unique way of creating a division between the ethnic groups and the “American” residents of the neighborhood. Smith, speaking to the diversity of Five Points, noted that “every nation almost in the world, have representatives in this foul and dangerous locality.”¹¹³ Yet in his numerically decreasing list

¹¹⁰ Foster, *New York by Gas-Light*, 57.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 55.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 55.

¹¹³ Smith, *Sunshine and Shadow*, 207.

of population by nation, native-born Americans came last, despite higher numbers than the English, Portuguese, and Welsh. McCabe, too, provided that of the 92 families in the No. 14 Baxter Mission are “151 Italians, 92 Irish, 28 Chinese, 3 English, 2 Jews, 1 German, and but 7 Americans.”¹¹⁴ Not only in the visual descriptions of the racial diversity of the city, but also in the mere facts presented, is there a clear separation between “us” and the “other.” As Heap demonstrated, slumming and slum literature worked to associate “each of the new populations with particular urban spaces, simultaneously establishing them in the public’s mind as exotic others.”¹¹⁵ The construction of a racial landscape, therefore, succinctly fit into a moral one, too.

Taken as a whole, the emergence of tourist guidebooks and urban sketchbook pieces on Five Points reflects a style of representing the “other” in terms of class, race, and morality. For their middle- and upper-class audiences, these authors created an entertaining, yet Victorian and evangelical response to the rapid urbanization and immigration occurring in New York. They formulated an imaginative and mythical idea of the slum and the people who live in it, acting on the moralizing impulse to the visible immigrant presence. While they reported scenes “as it is,” their writing revealed less about the people who inhabited Five Points, and more about an overarching need to identify, in order to alleviate, social and moral anxieties. Textually reordering a place that was described as alluring, fragmented, and chaotic was perhaps not a conscious choice of these authors, but they nevertheless marginalized Five Points through racial, moral, and behavioral boundaries.

¹¹⁴ Smith, *Sunshine and Shadow*, 205-6.

¹¹⁵ Heap, *Slumming*, 9.

The Rhetoric of Reform in Five Points

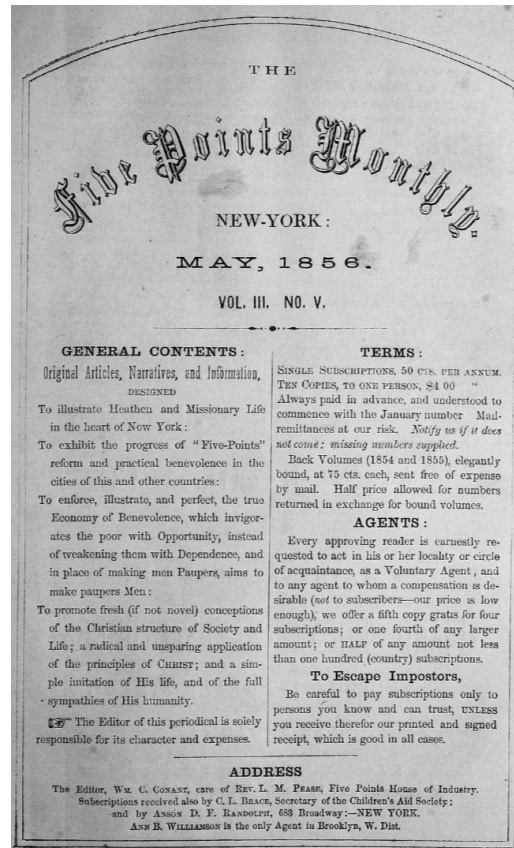


Figure 9: A cover of *Five Points Monthly for the House of Industry*¹¹⁶

Beginning in 1850 and continuing across the 1890s, Five Points attracted enormous attention from female missionaries and reformers who sought to actively change the impoverished conditions and criminal tendencies of its residents.¹¹⁷ The Five Points Mission and the Five Points House of Industry were the two main missions that supported the Five Points area throughout this period. They were celebrated for eliminating disease, unemployment, and ignorance, focusing largely on temperance, conversion, and literacy campaigns for the largely Irish Catholic immigrant population.¹¹⁸ *The Old Brewery and the Mission House at the Five*

¹¹⁶ Five Points House of Industry, *The Five Points Monthly* 3, no. 3 (1856), 1, American Antiquarian Society.

¹¹⁷ 1850 marks the founding of the Five Points Mission, although early missionary work such as handing out pamphlets and organizing sermons existed informally in Five Points under the direction of religious women's groups in the 1820s and 1830s.

¹¹⁸ Robert Fitts, "The Rhetoric of Reform: The Five Points Missions and the Cult of Domesticity", *Historical Archaeology* 35, no. 3 (2001), 117.

Points (1854), *The Five Points Monthly* (1854-1856), *The Monthly Echo of the Original Five Points Mission* (1874-1898), and the *Annual Reports of the New York Ladies' Home Missionary Society* (1867-1895) continuously reported on the existing poverty and results of their reform efforts in Five Points, and reveal insight into not only the relationship they had with the neighborhood, but their approach and views on the urban poor more broadly.

In his study of slumming and philanthropy in Victorian London, historian Seth Koven suggests a need to reassess the boundary between the missionary practices in poor neighborhoods and the slumming expeditions of the middle class.¹¹⁹ By the late nineteenth-century, the contemporary meaning of “slumming” in London had changed from “sensationalism, sexual transgression, and self-seeking gratification” to “charity, sociological research, Christian rescue, social work, [or] investigative journalism.” Looking at the language of reform in London, Koven shows that this change in meaning was not so clear under the hood.¹²⁰ Therefore, viewing the reform and investigative work in Five Points as another means to traverse class boundaries enlightens our understanding of slumming itself, and the extent to which the reputation of Five Points was the object of this social mechanism.

At the time when the missionaries formally began their work in Five Points, slumming was primarily an activity among journalists and the upper-class who could afford police escorts to visit the neighborhood. However, the rise of female missionaries and philanthropic workers in Five Points paralleled slumming’s expansion as a middle-class activity.¹²¹ Women would traditionally distance themselves from unsafe and unrespectable areas, but their inclusion in public spaces and involvement in reform work allowed them entrance into neighborhoods like Five Points. Seeing young women in Five Points completely altered the public perception of

¹¹⁹ Koven, *Slumming*, 6.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 7-9.

¹²¹ Heap, *Slumming*, 4-21.

slumming, giving an idea that it was more widely accepted and that the neighborhood was more navigable in general.¹²² Their involvement in Five Points, therefore, cannot be excluded from the discussion of middle-class slumming.

The inaugural edition of the *Five Points Monthly Record* in March of 1854 is an example of the sensationalized literary tactics that were shared with the tourist guidebooks of this period. From the first page of the series, the *Five Points Monthly* established itself as similar tellers of New York “as it is,” vowing to reveal the “wretchedness which underlie our metropolitan,” “catacombs of living death,” “mysterious abominations,” and “daring discoveries,” that have been “flung open.” Speaking directly to the reader, the *Five Points Monthly* declared that it contained all the “answers [that] have come forth” about the poverty in the neighborhood “which have thrilled us with pity and horror...those who by speechless misery were forbid to tell the secrets of their prison-house, have been lent a voice.” In this account, the *Five Points Monthly* drew on similar themes of temptation, “sensual” vice, and hidden secrets that we have explored in slum literature. While the explicit intent was to detail the reform in Five Points, its tone aligned closer to one of entertainment, amusement, and implicit moral divisions of dark and light.¹²³

Perhaps it was through this sensationalized tone that the mission could provide comfort and ease to its readers about the poverty in New York and simultaneously attract an audience to its cause. Throughout the publication, the editors spoke of the vices that “have taken a hold on the public and Christian mind.” By articulating poverty as a threat to the broader, sensible public, they could appeal to their heartstrings, while squashing their fears that vice in the city will no longer be hidden in their streets. This effect can be seen in the various anecdotes throughout the

¹²² Heap, *Slumming*, 6.

¹²³ The Five Points House of Industry, *Five Points Monthly* 1, no. 1 (March, 1854), 1, American Antiquarian Society.

editions of the *Five Points Monthly*. Stories titled “The Lone Little Emigrant,” “The Husband’s Letter,” “The Deserted Family,” and “Love at First Sight” were highly captivating, with detailed dialogue and clear storylines that ended in the rescuing and saving of poor immigrants (Figure 10).¹²⁴

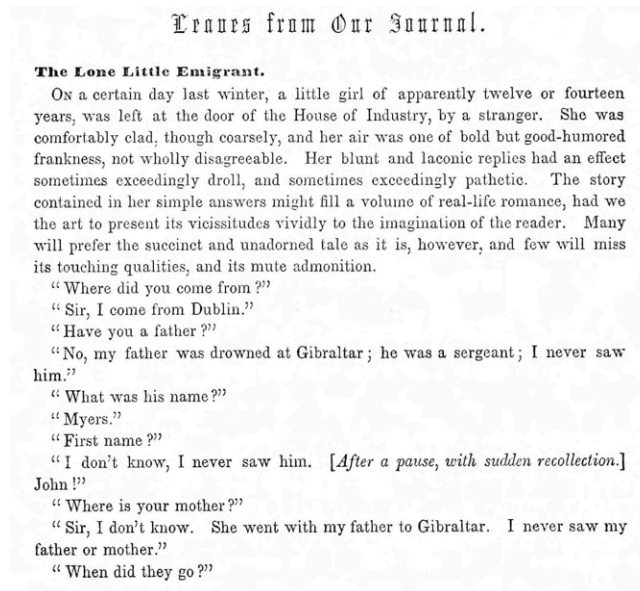


Figure 10: Excerpt from “The Lone Little Emigrant” in the *Five Points Monthly*

In one story, the author invited the reader to “walk a few blocks with us.” “Haven’t time?” they asked, “Yes, you have time, for this is no idle walk.” They described a girl on the street who ate an apple from the gutter: “there she is, by the curb-stone—do you see her?”¹²⁵ Through these stories, mission literature engaged their audiences through the premise of “armchair slumming” by taking them directly to the streets of Five Points. Whether or not these were true events, their depiction more closely resembled that of the dramatized slum literature of the tourist guidebooks. Their tactics clearly worked, too. Following the publication of this March edition, the Five Points House of Industry collected \$649.62 in donations in April of 1854 (the

¹²⁴ *Five Points Monthly* 1, no. 1 (March, 1854), 10-48.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 10.

equivalent of 24,000 U.S. dollars today), with sixty-nine individual donations ranging from \$9.25 to \$3,694.¹²⁶

A separate publication of the Old Brewery Mission, *The Old Brewery and the Mission House at the Five Points*, began their inaugural edition with these words: “Five Points! a name which has hitherto been banished from the vocabulary of the refined and sensitive...it is the synonym for ignorance the most entire, for misery the most abject, for crime the darkest dye.”¹²⁷ This quote depicts the tone that comprised much of the mission reports on Five Points. It saw its residents as the antithesis of evangelical and middle-class respectability, describing sorrow, robbery, and shame as traits inherited since infancy: the men giving no protection to his family, the women without femininity and maternalism, and the children, robbed of their innocence.¹²⁸



Figure 11: “The Home of the Astor House Beggar”, *The Old Brewery*, 1854

¹²⁶ *Five Points Monthly* 1, no. 2 (May, 1854), 64. Using the donation report for April of 1854 in the May edition of the *Five Points Monthly Record*, I estimated today’s sums with inflation using www.officialdata.org.

¹²⁷ Ladies of the Mission, *The Old Brewery and the Mission House at the Five Points* (New York: Stringer and Townsend, 1854), 34.

¹²⁸ Ladies of the Mission, *The Old Brewery*, 35.

Robert Fitts argued that *The Old Brewery* over-emphasized the poverty and crime in Five Points in order to acknowledge the impact they had on transforming an immoral class.¹²⁹ They described the homes of the poor before they moved into the mission, wherein “women lay on a mass of filthy, unsightly rags...actually pulling off the skins [of potatoes] with their finger nails.”¹³⁰ The illustrative and dramatized tactics, as well as the morally tantalizing reaction to the domesticity of the women are underlying threads to their work, but common also to the slum literature of the urban sketchbook genre. Figure 11 shows an illustration featured in *The Old Brewery* of the home of a beggar and his family. The empty bottles and drunken posture of the mother and father, as well as the curious look of their daughter, appealed to the pity of the middle-class viewers and served as reminders of what immorality and vice could do to the Protestant family household. The enormous popularity of these books speaks to the overall cultural dominance of slum literature in America. As many as 100,000 copies were sold, but as Fitts noted, “few were purchased for their advice.”¹³¹ For their amusement, illustrative depictions of poverty, and advocacy for Protestant ideology, the missions and their publications were remarkably similar to the divisive and subordinating writings of the city-mysteries and tourist guidebooks.

Muckraking and Photojournalism in Five Points

Jacob Riis was especially famous for his documentary work in New York around the 1880s and 1890s. Like the reformers and missionaries before him, Riis responded to public concerns over poverty, but focused largely on the tenement crisis in Lower Manhattan. While Riis’s work was more closely associated with the Lower East Side, much of his early work focused on the newly-settled Italian immigrant population in Five Points. His publications show

¹²⁹ Fitts, “The Rhetoric of Reform”, 120.

¹³⁰ Ladies of the Mission, *The Old Brewery*, 48.

¹³¹ Fitts, “The Rhetoric of Reform”, 117.

a continuation of the themes present in reform discourses and tourist guidebooks. They give an understanding of the long-lasting public desire to transgress class boundaries.

Even with the dense guidebooks and exhaustive exposés that circulated New York in the mid to late nineteenth century, those who saw Five Points still believed that words could not convey its misfortune and poverty. One traveler observed that “I have never seen any thing which has been written about this noted place, that gave any idea of it.”¹³² Despite its enormous notoriety in American minds, Five Points still seemed like a place that had yet to be truly explored and unveiled to the public.



Fig 12: Jacob A. Riis, *The Man Slept in This Cellar for Four Years*, 1890¹³³

Jacob Riis was widely acknowledged as a pioneer of reformism through photojournalism and his documentary-style exposés. As a Danish immigrant himself, he aimed to improve the living conditions of poor immigrants in New York, and published widely read prose on his observations and propositions to alleviate housing and expand on education and leisure for the urban poor.¹³⁴ Anbinder claims that his book *How the Other Half Lives* “revived and intensified

¹³² William Bobo, *Glimpses of New-York City, by a South Carolinian* (Charleston: Gale, Sabin Americana, 1852), 93.

¹³³ Notice the visual similarities with McCabe’s illustration of the cellars in Five Points (Figure 7).

¹³⁴ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 342.

New Yorkers' concern for Five Points and its infamous slum housing,” and a careful analysis of the language and content of his work shows that Riis, too, may be seen as a promoter of slumming. Heap argues that even in the form of “benevolent uplift, sociological investigation, or the mere pursuit of pleasure,” cross-class interactions “operated under the general rubric of ‘slumming’.”¹³⁵ While Riis published the peak of his work in 1890 and overlapped for a few decades with the missionary reports on Five Points, he reached far wider audiences and provided a more acute visualization of poverty for the middle class.

The rise of photography as an infrastructural technology greatly widened the public consumption of slum literature. With his colorful prose, romantic interviews, and groundbreaking photography, Riis captured a setting that was perhaps more believable and evidence-based than the guidebooks of Five Points. He turned the idea of poverty into a tangible, viewable reality for his readers that Five Points really *was* what it seemed. But his photographs also transformed ordinary cul-de-sacs, alleyways, and marketplaces into new tourist attractions and points of contention to the American public. According to Anbinder, Riis’s photographs popularized a block of tenement housing in Five Points known as “Mulberry Bend,” which represented all kinds of miserable living to postbellum New Yorkers.¹³⁶ Similarly, “Bottle Alley” and “Bandits’ Roost,” sites which were home to mostly Irish immigrants from Sligo, became known after his publications as a “favorite haunt of murderers and thieves.”¹³⁷ Like the guidebooks before him, Riis inadvertently provided new destinations and landmarks of Five Points for leisurely slummers to follow suit.

Riis also romanticized poverty in his publications. Seen in Figure 13 and 14, the glaring look of his subjects into the camera is jarring and unforgettable. Riis often entered

¹³⁵ Heap, *Slumming*, 19-21.

¹³⁶ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 93.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, 93.

neighborhoods and tenements during police raids, so it is possible that the attention of these men and women sitting on the stoops and looking through the windows was in equal curiosity of the camera as it was in cautious alert.¹³⁸ Historians have suggested that his photographs were partially staged in instances where his subjects might be seen smiling or posing. The potential that he framed his photographs for artistic or commercial purposes, rather than altruist intention has garnered him significant criticism in the recent decades, with scholars arguing that he participated in a “bourgeois esthetic discourse” and produced “victim photography” to achieve his reform goals.¹³⁹ Even if fact-gathering or educational purposes were the reasons behind Riis’s desire to capture “how the other half live[d],” it gave him a platform to encourage travel to Five Points to the average American. Through his perspective of reform, Riis transformed the act of visiting the slum from an eye-opening leisure, to an essential moral good.



Fig 13, 14: Jacob A. Riis, *Bandits' Roost & Bottle Alley, Mulberry Street, ca. 1888*¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Lauren Jensen, "The Photographs of Jacob Riis: History in Relation to Truth," *Constructing the Past* 5, no. 6 (2004), 6.

¹³⁹ Carol Quirke, "Picturing the Poor: Jacob Riis's Reform Photography," *Reviews in American History* 36, no. 4 (2008), 558.

¹⁴⁰ Jacob Riis, "Bandits' Roost" & "Bottle Alley" ca. 1888, International Center of Photography.

Against the backdrop of tourist guidebooks and slum literature, we can recognize that the widely circulated publications of Five Points reformers and missionaries may have been more exploitative of their immigrant subjects than previously realized. They shared literary styles that sensationalized poverty and ascribed moral messages hidden in themes of light and dark. While they aimed to unveil the realities of the urban poor, they actually allowed their middle-class audience to participate in an “armchair slumming” of their own. Moreover, these sources rarely included or emphasized the vibrant immigrant and working-class culture present in Five Points.

Chapter Three: Change and Continuity in Five Points

When Paul Preston visited Five Points in 1868, he admitted that Charles Dickens's account had "awakened a morbid desire" to explore the neighborhood himself. Strolling through the rather peculiar streets, it had come to Preston's attention that Five Points, although unlike any area in New York, was "not one half the pestilential hole [Dickens] had represented." Preston was well aware of Five Points' reputation, recognizing various streets and landmarks from crime chronicles he read throughout the years. His report was thorough, describing the prostitution, homeless squatters, variety of grocery stores, Chinese street jugglers, and the popular mix of saloons and dancehalls. Still, Preston remarked that Dickens "failed to note the variations in character present at every turn in this labyrinth... the hallucinations of a romancer's brain did Mr. Dickens create an unfair and unjust impression as to this moral plague spot."¹⁴¹

Walt Whitman decided to visit Five Points "just for fun" on the same day that he read Preston's report in the *New York Clipper*. He went at night with a policeman and wrote to his friend, Harry, that the "account in the Clipper is a very good description—only not half rank enough... it was instructive but disgusting—I saw one of the handsomest white girls there I ever saw, only about 18—blacks & white are all intermingled." Whitman then wrote to Harry that he sent Preston's column to another friend, John, alerting him to ask for the account — "it will amuse you."¹⁴² From Dickens and Preston to Whitman, John and Harry, attention to Five Points carried on through the end of the nineteenth century.

Preston and Whitman visited Five Points twenty-five years after Charles Dickens wrote *American Notes*. At the time of Preston's writing, many articles already began to discuss the changes which had occurred in Five Points, celebrating the work of missionaries and reformers

¹⁴¹ Paul Preston, "Reminiscences of a Man About Town: On the 'Five Points'", *New York Clipper* (October 3, 1868), 4.

¹⁴² Walt Whitman letter to Henry Hurt (October 2, 1868), The Walt Whitman Archive.

to lessen the visible poverty in the neighborhood. While some writers like Preston observed these changes and argued that Five Points was unfairly represented, others still considered it to be a slum above anything else. Largely from the dissemination of urban sketchbook narratives and sensationalized media coverage, no measure of reform seemed to be enough to undo the reputation of Five Points that was so irreversibly established in popular minds. Furthermore, any positive change in the neighborhood was strictly accredited to the work of the missionaries.

This chapter will discuss how people viewed Five Points as the neighborhood evolved in the nineteenth century. I attempt to address this concurrently from two sides: one, through the untold, lived economic and social realities of Five Pointers between the 1840s and 1860s, and two, in the way missionaries and journalists between the 1850s and 1890s shaped the public's idea of Five Points as a slum. The first part of the chapter will look at a collection of published emigrant letters, the savings accounts of Irish famine immigrants, and the religious diversity in Five Points. The second half of the chapter will examine the work of the missions and postbellum changes in Five Points, and the media's reaction to these changes. These sources show that "progress" in the neighborhood was actually about lessening religious and racial boundaries between Five Points and the rest of New York, rather than removing poverty itself. Analyzing the contemporary meaning of progress in Five Points allows us to see that social divisions and perceptions of differences made the neighborhood a "slum."

A Guidebook for Emigrants

Counsel for Emigrants was published in 1838 to advise those considering emigration to North America.¹⁴³ The first edition in 1834 received excellent reviews, with the *Aberdeen*

¹⁴³ There are few qualitative sources from the immigrant perspective in this time period, so it would be remiss of me if I did not include the ones that do exist, and are discussed frequently in the historiography. Using these sources allow me to better contest the reputation of Five Points as per the aim of this chapter. This source was highlighted in Anbinder's research, "Moving Beyond 'Rags to Riches'," and access to their entirety can be found through Google Scholar.

Observer calling it “the best book on emigration that has yet to come under our notice; and no one intending to emigrate, or interested in the subject, should be without a copy of it.” Stated in the introduction, the purpose of this book was to create a “complete magazine of the most essential matters that can concern an emigrant about to settle in Canada or the United States.” In addition to a collection of glowing letters written by European immigrants in North America, the book contained opinions of the best places to emigrate, advantages and disadvantages of emigration, outfit and medical advice for the voyage, travel fares, and information about immigration ports.¹⁴⁴

One Irish laborer in New York, writing home to a friend, boasted that he had “butcher-meat twice-a-week.” Showing the letter to his employer, who reminded him that he ate meat every day, the Irishman remarked that his “friends would *disbelieve all* he had said, if he had told them *that*.”¹⁴⁵ A Scot wrote to a friend that “I have not repented of coming here for one moment, and, indeed, regret that I was so long in coming.” He enjoyed tea, coffee, apple tarts, rice pudding, sweet milk, and bread, listing his living cost to be “only 12 shillings” per month. He explained that the disadvantages of emigration were homesickness and mental “decay” on account of “every thing [in America] being *new*.” Most of all, however, he emphasized the noticeable “jealousy and suspicion shown by the natives to strangers.” Paradoxically, many immigrants were “sadly puzzled to know what liberty means,” giving anecdotes of an Irishman getting sent to the penitentiary for kicking the shins of a custom-house officer, or an Englishman disappointed in getting “no fun, no wakes nor fairs...the Yankees are a sedate reflecting people, and will not join in their uproarious jollity.”¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ *Counsel for Emigrants, and Interesting Information from Numerous Sources* (Aberdeen: John Mathison, 1838), i-iv.

¹⁴⁵ *Counsel for Emigrants*, x.

¹⁴⁶ “Extract of Letters written by a gentleman from Scotland” (September, 1832), *Counsel for Emigrants*, 50-51.

Another Scot, writing to a friend in Aberdeen, discussed his work as a flaxdresser with his three sons in New York. He enjoyed the weather and the cheaper costs of living compared to that in Scotland. The biggest advantage of emigration, in his opinion, was employment opportunity: “everyone who desires [a job] may have it at more or less wages; and to the man who lives by his own energies, the advantages are all on the side of America.” He concluded his letter with a similar remark to the others in the guidebook: “my only regret is that I did not come here sooner.”¹⁴⁷

Historians have viewed these letters with skepticism, putting them in the category of “elitist primary sources” on the subject of immigration, and questioned the authenticity of such raving accounts of immigrant life in America. Instead, primary material such as the census and court records have been more central to the history of immigration “from the bottom up.”¹⁴⁸ However, because of the overwhelming readership of guidebooks in the 1800s that featured anti-immigrant sentiment, the publication of the *Counsel for Emigrants* is significant in itself. While the letters may be viewed with apprehension, their content is nevertheless worth discussion.

It is possible that some guidance on behalf of the editors may have been given to the writers of these letters, seeing that they all directly address the advantages and disadvantages of emigration — the same goal that the guidebook intended to serve. But with the few existing sources from the immigrant perspective on their livelihood in New York, their experiences hone in on a few central themes that remain absent from middle-class depictions in the press. First, none of their accounts discuss the crowdedness of housing. Rather, they view their living conditions with relative content, boasting cheaper rent and a wider availability of food compared

¹⁴⁷ “Extract of a Letter from a Flaxdresser” (July, 1833), *Counsel for Emigrants*, 81-82.

¹⁴⁸ Tyler Anbinder, “Moving Beyond ‘Rags to Riches’: New York’s Irish Famine Immigrants and Their Surprising Savings Accounts”, *The Journal of American History* 99, no. 3 (2012), 741-2.

to that in Europe. They also did not view themselves as part of an impoverished lower class. Instead, their sense of identity was more heavily rooted in being immigrants, expressing a division between themselves and the native population in New York — both in feeling culturally distant and a sense of disillusionment with what “liberty” actually meant in America. Finally, they viewed America as a place with greater opportunity than in the Old World. In many of these letters, the immigrants understood that “everyone who desires [a job] may have it.”¹⁴⁹ For them, the offer of mobility was the principal reason why they moved to, and stayed in New York.

Five Points Bank Account Savings

Viewing the census records and bank accounts of Irish Five Pointers does, in fact, confirm the words of the letters in the *Counsel for Emigrants*. Historians of famine-era Irish immigrants have argued that compared to German and English immigrants in the antebellum period, the Irish achieved far less upwards mobility. The success of each immigrant group is relative, however, to the conditions in which they arrived. Irish immigrants were far more likely to arrive in New York without any belongings — spending either their last savings on emigration itself or receiving sponsorship by their landlords and working to pay for the rest of their family’s Atlantic voyage. Immigrants from Northern Ireland, for instance, had more wealth on average upon arriving in New York and thus tended not to live in Five Points compared to those from famine Ireland. But looking at the perhaps more reliable data of Irish bank accounts reveals “surprising” insight into a real “rags-to-riches” story of emigration.¹⁵⁰

According to the research of historian Tyler Anbinder, nearly forty percent of Irish immigrants saved today’s equivalent of \$10,000 after less than a decade in America. They put their money into the Emigrant Industrial Savings Bank, which was founded in 1850 by a group

¹⁴⁹ “Extract of a Letter from a Flaxdresser” (July, 1833), *Counsel for Emigrants*, 81-82.

¹⁵⁰ Anbinder, “Moving Beyond ‘Rags to Riches’”, 743-744.

of wealthy Irish Americans who aimed to help adjust Irish immigrants to life in America.¹⁵¹ By 1856, nearly 5,500 accounts were opened, together holding more than \$1,300,000. In 1858, this number amounted to 18,000 accounts. The deeply detailed “test books” of the bank allowed for such informative research for Anbinder, showing the depositors name, address, occupation, physical description, marital status, number of children, and even the place of birth down to the specific parish and townland within the parish.¹⁵²

Moreover, the occupational distribution and average date of emigration of these account holders reveal that they are very representative of the New York Irish population at large. If anything, the data underestimate the median savings amount of Irish immigrants in the antebellum period. Most of the account holders also lived in the Sixth Ward, where Five Points was located. Around forty and thirty-five percent of the male Irish-born Emigrant Savings Bank depositors held skilled and unskilled jobs, respectively. Ten percent consisted of business owners, with the remaining fifteen percent made up of white collar workers, petty entrepreneurs, and professionals. Female depositors also saved noteworthy sums, with a majority serving as domestic servants, averaging today’s equivalent of \$5,000. Perhaps the most significant finding of this study was that unskilled famine immigrants saved more than their skilled counterparts, with the median balance savings totaling more than six months of their pay.¹⁵³

The discoveries from the Emigrant Savings Bank are significant in the study of New York immigration, especially in disrupting the Five Points narrative. Their savings tell a story of upwards mobility rather than decay and misery like most outsider historical accounts have told.

For one, Irish immigrants had enormous success in finding employment. Many household

¹⁵¹ This group founded the Irish Emigrant Society in 1841, and the Emigrant Industrial Savings Bank was tied to the Irish Catholic community to incentivize Irish immigrants to save money. The database and personal records of these account holders can now be found on Ancestry.com from Anbinder’s research. (Source: Anbinder, “Moving Beyond ‘Rags to Riches’”).

¹⁵² Anbinder, “Moving Beyond ‘Rags to Riches’”, 747.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 747-750.

incomes were supplemented by hard-working women and even children. In addition, the top savers were able to use their money to open their own businesses and change occupations. Between 1852 and 1860, the number of male famine immigrants who owned their own business increased by 232%.¹⁵⁴ Most of all, the data shows that many Irish immigrants *chose* to live in Five Points far beyond the point that they could afford to move elsewhere. The dramatized and sensationalized prose of many journalists and reformists failed to account for the reality of immigrant life, unable to see beyond their foreign identity and crowded living spaces in Five Points tenements.

Religion

Peter McLoughlin's tenement building on 472 Pearl Street was not just home to a large community of Irish and Italian immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century. The top floor of the building was actually the site of New York's fourth synagogue. Shaarey Zedek, founded by a group of Polish Jews in 1839, held their services in a small apartment before moving to the corner of Centre and White streets one year later. It was established in part to hold a more relaxed position on intermarriage and the conversion of non Jews into the religion, as many Jewish men found Christian or non-denominational partners in Five Points. Six more Jewish congregations were established in various apartment floors, saloons, and Jewish-ran stores, remaining there until the end of the nineteenth century when many Jews began to settle in the Lower East Side.¹⁵⁵

In fact, Five Points contained a number of other religious institutions that were reflective of its diverse population. By 1846, a Baptist church on Mulberry Street, an Episcopal house of worship and a Welsh Baptist chapel on Mott Street, a Swedenborgian church on Pearl Street, and

¹⁵⁴ Anbinder, "Moving Beyond 'Rags to Riches'", 748.

¹⁵⁵ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 158-159.

an African-American congregation on Orange Street all made Five Points their home. The community initiative as well as the coexistence of these establishments in the heart of a “slum” is truly remarkable. For instance, Beth Hamidrash, a Jewish congregation formed in the top floor of an apartment on 83 Bayard Street, united members of their faith across language and background, with a significant Russian, German, and Polish Jewish membership.¹⁵⁶ Five Pointers held a high interest in offering and seeking religious conversations and services, and despite their limited resources, they managed to operate several notable establishments inside their own homes and stores. As different ethnic groups settled in Five Points, they formed their own religious communities, testifying to the dynamic and mobile nature of the Five Points population.

Reform

Despite the evident religious diversity, the origin of the reform initiatives in Five Points had moralizing and proselytizing objectives. One minister called Five Points an “idolatrous, Church-forsaken district,” and many missionaries and journalists ignored their religious practices, claiming its inhabitants were illiterate, unsaved, and in desperate need of the teachings of the Bible.¹⁵⁷ This was rooted in a predominant belief that Christianity would help lift Five Pointers out of poverty. In the 1830s, women of the New York City Tract Society and the American Female Moral Reform Society handed out religious pamphlets in Five Points, read bible verses, and stood outside brothels to advise men and women to repent. A conversion campaign and missionary presence in Five Points was established from the time many immigrants arrived there in the 1830s and 1840s. Over the next two decades, various Protestant organizations targeted Five Points for similar reform campaigns, culminating in the founding of

¹⁵⁶ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 158-159. Other Jewish congregations, however, had various ethnic rivalries and excluded Russian Jews but those inevitably struggled with limited membership as Orthodox law requires at least ten male members.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 158.

the Five Points Mission in 1850, located in a former gin shop on 1 Little Water Street, and in the heart of the neighborhood.¹⁵⁸

By 1855, many of the aforementioned Protestant congregations had left Five Points as the Catholic and Jewish population increased. Echoed in slum literature and missionary reports, the Irish Catholic population were predominantly seen as “living in their own filth, and the extreme poverty, addicted to drunkenness and its kindred vices.”¹⁵⁹ Most of all, they were “ignorant of the truth as it is in Jesus, and unwilling to listen to the teachings of any ministers but those of their own faith.”¹⁶⁰ The Five Points Mission was founded on the desire to awaken the Catholic population in Five Points, hoping the “Word of God” would alleviate the poverty and misfortune of the immigrant population. When Lewis M. Pease was elected as the leader of the Five Points Mission, however, he believed that creating employment and educational opportunities for the urban poor would be more effective than the preaching methods of the mission. Debate ensued over the proselytizing and industry-focused methodologies of reform, with a majority of government agencies supporting a religious-based transformation of Five Points.¹⁶¹

After years of competition for government-backed financing and dispute over the mission’s goals, Pease decided to form his own, privately-funded organization in Five Points, the House of Industry. His organization, as Anbinder suggests, was “radical.”¹⁶² Pease sought “physical, social and moral reformation” and the “suppression of houses of infamy” through bathtubs, wardrobes, vocational training, morning and evening devotion, prayer meeting, singing-school, Bible classes, Sabbath school, and a temperance meeting every week.¹⁶³ His first

¹⁵⁸ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 158-160.

¹⁵⁹ *Monthly Record of the Five Points House of Industry* 1, no. 6 (October 1, 1857), 125. American Antiquarian Society.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 125.

¹⁶¹ *Monthly Record of the Five Points House of Industry* 2, no. 14 (May 1, 1858), 8. American Antiquarian Society.

¹⁶² Anbinder, *Five Points*, 163.

¹⁶³ The curriculum for vocational training included sewing, baking, shoemaking, corset-making, basket weaving, and hatmaking. Over 500 people worked in these trades in the House of Industry in 1854. (Anbinder, *Five Points*, 164).

step was to purchase brothels adjacent to the building and hire the women as needle-workers to provide clothing for the poor. He later formed a non-denominational school for the children in Five Points and allowed his members to attend their own churches, while some missions still rejected the admission or aid of Catholic and Jewish children unless they swore to convert to Protestantism. The impact of the House of Industry on the Five Points community was unprecedented. Pease's institution placed 630 trainees from their vocational programs into jobs and homes across the city by 1857.¹⁶⁴ Despite condemnation from the public about his industry-focused methods, his success was in part due to his greater attentiveness to the real needs and desires of the families in Five Points, which allowed his tenants to be more open and willing to participate in his programs in the first place.

Meanwhile, the Five Points Mission continued under the direction of rigid Methodist leaders. In 1852, the mission purchased the Old Brewery — one of the most famous slumming attractions and landmarks in Five Points — to expand their organization.¹⁶⁵ The destruction of this building was monumental for New Yorkers at the time. Supposedly, criminals went looking for stolen goods before it was torn down and law-abiding citizens brought torches to explore the hidden depths of the Old Brewery in its final days.¹⁶⁶ The city-wide mourning of the building speaks to the sheer notoriety of Five Points, and the landmarks of poverty that defined it, but also to the new chapter in Five Points history. If anything, the eradication of New York's most densely populated and diverse building, and the construction of a new mission with a moralizing and anti-Catholic agenda is symbolic of Five Points history as a whole.

¹⁶⁴ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 163.

¹⁶⁵ The Old Brewery, as the name suggested, began as a brewery in the center of Five Points and later became one of the most famous tenement buildings in Five Points and all of New York. It was thought to be the most densely populated building in nineteenth-century New York. Much of slum literature and investigative journalism from this period rarely omitted discussion of the Old Brewery, and it is featured in one of the opening scenes in *Gangs of New York*.

¹⁶⁶ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 163.

But the expansion of the Five Points Mission into the heart of the neighborhood ignited some controversy in the press. A Catholic newspaper argued that “establishing *Methodism* as the religion of the Five Points, at the public expense” did not outweigh the need for poverty relief measures in the area.¹⁶⁷ An 1852 *Times* article reacted that “they have converted what has always been the very den of thieves and murders and prostitutes...into a house of industry and order...Can a sincere and right-minded Catholic so grudge them the chance of making a possible convert to their faith, as to denounce and oppose the unquestioned good they have done?”¹⁶⁸ As their presence grew in Five Points, Irish-Americans began to speak out against the prejudicial nature of the missions against Catholics and Jews. One writer of the *Irish-American* asserted that “I hate these canting scoundrels of the ‘Five Points Mission’ as much as I do the Inquisition...and I regard their ‘reformation’ of the most abandoned as even worse than the destruction from which they affect to save them.”¹⁶⁹ Their resentment was justified; many Irish immigrants had already escaped anti-Catholic discrimination in their homeland, just to experience the same blatant hostility in America.

The nature of reform in Five Points is significant. On one hand, the missions did make astonishing progress in the neighborhood through educational and employment opportunities. But perhaps more important was how they defined progress in Five Points on a public level, as the missions vowed to remove the elements which were thought to have made Five Points a slum — poor housing, inadequate work experience, drunkenness and vice, and most of all, the Catholic convictions of Five Pointers. The mere presence of the missions in the heart of Five Points, and the degree of authority they held over the residents in the neighborhood contributed to a different public perception of Five Points entirely, and imposed an *idea* that the balance of

¹⁶⁷ Quoted in Anbinder, *Five Points*, 162.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 162.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 166.

power between immigrant and black residents was now shifting in the direction of Protestant moral reformers in the most feared area in New York.

Despite the ways that Pease's agenda differed from the Methodist approach of his counterparts, the missions remained controversial in proselytizing and morally subordinating the immigrant population in New York. They often overstepped into personal family matters of their tenants, imposing their own Protestant beliefs as an absolute truth for others. Their sweeping changes in Five Points testify to the extent to which Five Points residents held agency in their own growth and success, but also in speaking against the anti-Catholic nature of reform through their own publications in the press.

Making Sense of Reform in Five Points

Across the 1850s, the media was quick to recognize the success of the missions in Five Points. Many journalists praised the efforts of Pease and his missionary contemporaries, but omitted any recognition of agency on behalf of Five Pointers in contributing to their own success. In 1853, just one year after Pease had gained private funding to solidify his work in Five Points, a contributor for *Prisoner's Friend* announced that "this den of darkness and of sin has been successfully invaded; and the inmates of it are found, not to be hopeless, but within the reach of an enlightened sympathy."¹⁷⁰ This article recognized the short-comings of the Methodist reform approach and argued in favor of Pease's vocational training, but still spoke of the transformation in Five Points in terms of morality. The article referred to Pease as the "moral hero...by an inspiration of genius, sure always to lift up man and rebuild Christianity."¹⁷¹

The turnover of the media's stance on Five Points is important to note. Journalists seemed to announce the improvement of Five Points as quickly as they once deemed it a slum. The

¹⁷⁰ True Democrat, "Five Points, New York", *Prisoner's Friend: A Monthly Magazine Devoted to Criminal Reform, Philosophy, Science, Literature* (Dec 1, 1853), 162.

¹⁷¹ True Democrat, "Five Points", 162.

presence and leadership of the mission in Five Points was enough to change the public's social understanding of the neighborhood. As historian Chad Heap argues, it is not alone the existence of poverty that makes a neighborhood a slum, it is also founded on the societal recognition of class and racial boundaries.¹⁷² When the missionaries "invaded" the slum, they actually dissolved the boundary between rich and poor, and religious and irreligious which made Five Points a slum in the first place.

A similar point can be made about an 1853 account in the *New York Daily*, which described the missionary efforts in Five Points. The journalist, signed as C. L., discussed one girl who was known to live in "a very bad house with negroes" in Cow Bay. Hearing of the girl, Pease found and took her to the House of Industry. After being clothed and fed, she grew sick on account of being "in such dirty places and among such people so long." The girl was described as "beautiful" compared to "the other children in the Five Points," with soft and white skin, a fine nose and mouth, and elegant posture.¹⁷³ The article narrated the journey that the mission workers took through Five Points to find the girl's mother and little sister and alert them of her illness. They went through "almost every vile negro house," finding people who knew of her sister and offering ten dollars to anyone who could locate her. They then found her sister, Tuny, living with a woman named "black Susan." The missionaries gave the woman five dollars and left with Tuny, now having the objective to "get a full declaration, before witnesses, from the mother, resigning both her daughters to the missionary." One black woman eventually knew where to find the mother, who was sick in a hospital at Blackwell's Island. The mother died the same night she signed the papers.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷² Heap, *Slumming*, 12.

¹⁷³ C.L., "A Scene in the Five Points", *New York Daily Times* (April 30, 1853), 6.

¹⁷⁴ C.L., "A Scene in the Five Points", 6.

Despite the advent of the missions, C.L.'s article highlights several continuities in the way Five Points was represented. For one, the rescue narrative of a beautiful white child from a predominantly black building is symbolic of the paternalistic attitudes of the missionaries in Five Points. They positioned themselves as saviors intervening in the lives of the marginalized, but distinguished between the “worthy” and “unworthy” poor on racial lines. Second, their ability to enter the homes of the poor, let alone to take children and ask parents to relinquish the rights over their children, shared a longstanding tradition of slumming in Five Points, which granted them invasive, yet “acceptable” authority to impose on and document the lives of the urban poor. As journalists responded to the work of reform in Five Points, they still utilized the “us” versus the “other” mechanisms inherent to slum literature, while creating a guise that the slum has been penetrated by trustworthy hands. Although the meaning of Five Points seemed to be shifting in the direction of progress and stability, the themes of otherness, interracial anxieties, vice, and poverty were still very much at play.

Civil War and Postbellum Transformations

On paper, it seemed as if the defining features of Dickens’s notorious slum had vanished by 1870. The Old Brewery became a Methodist church and mission, and Cow Bay was destroyed and replaced by a much larger House of Industry. Beyond the work of the missions, there were other factors that contributed to change in Five Points. Over the course of the Civil War, the population in the Sixth Ward dropped twenty-three percent, from 26,000 to under 20,000. Many New Yorkers enlisted in the war, and new tenement buildings in the Lower East Side allowed many Five Pointers to move outside of the neighborhood. The infamous wooden tenements in Five Points were replaced by larger, more spacious brick buildings.¹⁷⁵ By the 1870s, Five Points appeared to have lost its crowded and dark character that once made it so infamous.

¹⁷⁵ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 217.

New Yorkers considered postbellum Five Points a “tower of Babel” for its ethnic and linguistic diversity. Once dominated by the famine-era Irish, Italian immigrants had taken over the neighborhood by the 1890s, representing forty-nine percent of the population in Five Points. The number of Polish Jews and Chinese immigrants also started to rise by 1890. Of the native-born Americans living in Five Points, eighty percent had Irish-born parents, but the percentage of Irish-born adults living in Five Points was cut in half between 1855 and 1880. Five Points had not entirely lost its Irish legacy, but as one immigrant group came and went, another took its place.¹⁷⁶ Much of the history of Five Points is representative of this constant movement of immigrants, but the arrival of new immigrant groups generated more controversy over Five Points in the press. The neighborhood sat at the center of renewed nativist debates and anti-immigrant policy, as New Yorkers responded with equal vigor over the number of Italian and Chinese who came to Five Points during this period.¹⁷⁷

The nature of vice and crime had also changed in Five Points. The Bowery Boys, a famous street gang in the 1840s, was declared “nearly extinct” in an 1869 article. In addition, Five Points was no longer the primary destination for drinking and prostitution. One man remarked that “twenty years ago it was one of the head-quarters of the gamblers,” but by as early as 1855, the sporting subculture had ventured to new neighborhoods. Around the time that African Americans had nearly vacated the neighborhood in the 1860s, many of the black-owned dance halls and saloons also relocated closer to Greenwich Village. Over the Civil War and postbellum decades, many of the tenets of slum life had disappeared from Five Points.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 218.

¹⁷⁷ Ronald H. Baylor, *Neighbors in Conflict: The Irish, Germans, Jews, and Italians of New York City, 1929-1941* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 30-39; Lui, *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery*, 1-4.

¹⁷⁸ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 219.

For many visitors, the extension of Worth Street from the Five Points intersection to Chatham Square in 1868 was the largest improvement. The dark and eerie feeling in Five Points was countered by a greater openness of the streets themselves, letting “the daylight into the slums so effectually, that as many as could of the criminal class therein resident ‘got up and dusted’.”¹⁷⁹ This feeling was also reflected in physical changes of the tenements. New building codes in 1867 enforced tenement regulations, including the installment of fire escapes, improved sewage systems from outhouses, minimum window requirements, a ban on livestock in residential spaces, and the prohibition of leasing basement rooms without permit from the Board of Health.¹⁸⁰ Despite this, dramatized accounts of Five Points continued to surface the headlines towards the end of the nineteenth century.

Was Five Points A Mythic Slum?

Given the anecdotes in the media, it seemed as if these municipal laws attempted to fix the living conditions that made Five Points so notorious in the first place. Yet, they did not alter the way people saw Five Points, nor did it prevent them from publishing sensationalized accounts about the neighborhood. As new immigrant groups settled in the 1870s and 1880s, the familiar story of overcrowding, foul stench, and safety concerns crept back into the rhetoric on Five Points. While the notorious landmarks in Five Points no longer existed, they were replaced by new, equally famous buildings made popular by Jacob Riis’s photographs and other, more gruesome accounts in the media. Despite the postbellum changes in Five Points and decades of missionary work, the press created new features and landmarks that defined the neighborhood as a slum.

¹⁷⁹ Quoted in Anbinder, *Five Points*, 218.

¹⁸⁰ As mentioned in the introduction, many families (usually Italians) would house livestock in their bedrooms and grow food, keeping with their homeland traditions.

The most popular accounts of Five Points did not reflect the postbellum improvements to the neighborhood, even though they were published far after the changes took place. They continued to portray the neighborhood as a sensational slum for the gaze of the middle-class. A majority of the tourist guidebooks were only circulated until after the missions were established in Five Points. G.G. Foster wrote *New York by Gaslight* in 1850, Matthew Smith published *Sunshine and Shadow* in 1868, and McCabe released *Lights and Shadows* in 1872. These accounts built on Five Points' reputation of crime, crowdedness, interracial relationships, and prostitution that began in the 1830s and 1840s. Yet, they were published after the sweeping municipal regulations, lower tenement population density, and the time when the press announced that the missions had supposedly "invaded" the slum in 1853. The misleading timeline should not call into question the reality of improvement in Five Points, but rather undermine the very sources which allowed Five Points to be remembered as a slum in the first place. Much of slum literature seemed to be responding more to a literary trend than they were the actual conditions of the neighborhood.

The arrival of Italian immigrants over the next decade paralleled a new wave of slum tourism in Five Points. Tenements on Baxter, Mott, Mulberry, and Park streets (housing primarily Italian immigrants) replaced the infamy of Cow Bay and the Old Brewery as landmarks of the slum. Through his photographic work in the 1880s, Jacob Riis popularized the term "Mulberry Bend" to describe these streets, quickly becoming a staple in the New York vocabulary. In 1888, *Frank Leslie's* wrote that "the 'Bend' was once the dead-line of the Five Points; now it takes its place as a seat of iniquity, poverty, and dirt. It is one of the danger-spots of the town."¹⁸¹

¹⁸¹ Quoted in Anbinder, *Five Points*, 221.

From the outside, Riis argued, the Bend seemed “ordinary enough to look at from the street,” but behind the “perpetual market doing a very lively trade in its own queer staples,” lied the “rotten structures that harbored the very dregs of humanity...every foot of it reeked with incest and murder.”¹⁸² As the Italian immigrants took the place of the Irish in Five Points, seeing what lay behind the mysterious streets, once again, became a new morbid desire for many slum-goers. Despite the physical and demographic changes in Five Points, as well as decades of reform, the neighborhood’s sensationalized and exaggerated reputation remained the same.

Although Five Points still retained its identity as a slum throughout the 1880s, some publications would contest the entirely negative images of the new immigrant population. In 1888, one editor for *Harper’s Magazine* wrote that “some of [the Italian] homes were low, dark rooms, neglected and squalid; [while] others were clean and picturesque, with bright patchwork.” “As for the overcrowding,” the writer continued,

“No one who, for example, has spent a summer in Genoa, and has seen the stream of pallid, languid humanity...can find food for sensationalism in the manner of life common to Baxter Street. It must be remembered that the standard of prosperity in America is not that of Italy, and that a man is not necessarily destitute nor a pauper because he prefers organ-grinding or rag-picking to shoemaking or hod-carrying.”¹⁸³

Five Points was thus considered a slum in the nineteenth century largely because the melodramatic writings in the press heavily outnumbered those that aimed to understand Five Pointers themselves, and the nuance of their immigrant experience. The sensationalized view of

¹⁸² Quoted in Anbinder, *Five Points*, 226.

¹⁸³ “Italian Life in New York”, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* (April, 1888), 681-682; Rag-picking and organ-grinding were very common professions for Italian immigrants during this period, as it did not require them to speak English. Organ-grinding was both loved and shunned for its street spectacles featuring trained monkeys in Five Points (See Anbinder, *Five Points*, 233).

Five Points has dominated our historical understanding for so long, but when taking into account the reality of the neighborhood, how the residents found success and celebrated their culture, the history carved by slum literature begins to lose its value.

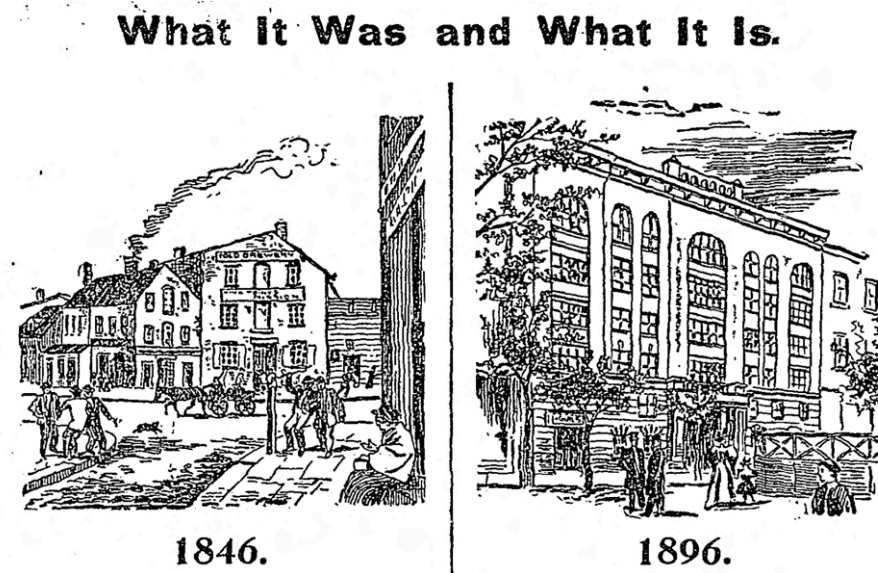


Fig 15: “The Five Points” in the *New York Times*, featuring the Old Brewery¹⁸⁴

It was not until 1896 that the reporting on the immigrant neighborhood began to shift in a new direction. A reporter in the *New York Times* made a point of showing the change over time in Five Points (Figure 15). What once was the “most dreadful spot on the American continent,” seemed in 1896 to compare “favorably with similar quarters of other great cities.” They accredited the improvement to the Five Points Mission and “its excellent army of Christian workers.” They juxtaposed an image of the landmark Old Brewery in 1846 to a new, much larger and sophisticated mission building in 1896 (See Figure 15). The pedestrians featured around the Old Brewery were shown in jagged movements, with one beggar, compared to the fine clothing and civil stances in the 1896 depiction.¹⁸⁵ In 1896, Five Points no longer stood alone in its poverty and crude, foreign-born population. In other words, it no longer possessed the attributes

¹⁸⁴ ““The Five Points”: What It Was and What It Is”, *New York Times* (March 21, 1896), 2.

¹⁸⁵ ““The Five Points””.

that made it an identifiable slum. Five Points was just like any other neighborhood in New York, fitting seamlessly with the dress and social codes of the surrounding American population.¹⁸⁶

Even when the *New York Times* swiftly put away the century-long reputation of Five Points, they implied that it was not poverty alone which made the neighborhood a slum. From the time that the missions were established in the 1850s, and up until the end of the nineteenth century, the transformation of Five Points was recognized on the basis of lessening class, racial, and religious distinctions with the rest of New York — despite evidence of thriving multi-ethnic religious groups, prosperous financial accounts, and the battle for respectability far before the missions even arrived. While contemporaries saw Five Points as a slum, it is precisely these distinctions and ethnic nuances that make New York such an exceptional city today.

¹⁸⁶ When the Chinese immigrants settled in Five Points in the early twentieth-century, the same cycle of media attention would start over. See Lui, *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery* for the similarities in the media in 1909-1911.

Conclusion

There is no linear story of progress or decline that may characterize the changes in Five Points over the course of the nineteenth century. Five Points evolved continuously as each immigrant group arrived, creating a story of opportunity, agency, and mobility. Despite Five Points being cast as a slum throughout the century, the neighborhood allowed immigrants to find cheap housing, live alongside their ethnic communities, and reach significant economic and social success. As the Irish went through the ebbs and flows of life in Five Points, the Italians, and later the Chinese, would experience the same patterns of growth. If any one thing may summarize the enigmatic and exciting history of Five Points, it is its role in the inception of this change.

New Yorkers expressed their anxieties over the uncertainty of class and ethnic relations, and indeed poverty and crime, in relation to the neighborhood. For a century, Five Points was described by those not living in it. Slum expeditions in Five Points allowed them to vent moral, ethnic, class, and religious anxieties, which in turn, solidified the perception of these boundaries altogether. Even through the guise of reform, missionaries and muckrakers participated in a slumming of their own. Analyzing their language of poverty and reform shows that Five Points was codified as a “slum” in terms of what they sought to fix — tenement overcrowding, prostitution, interracial relationships, and the religious convictions of Five Pointers. But the residents of Five Points reflected much differently on their life and had many thriving, interracial social networks in Five Points, though these accounts were absent entirely from slum literature.

As Five Points evolved over time, it did not escape the language of a slum, despite the evidence of agency and growth. Even when progress was thought to be made, journalists gave credit to the reformers who imposed their own moral and religious notions of progress. When the

press announced that the slum had finally been invaded in the mid-nineteenth century, familiar accounts of poverty again dominated the narrative when a new immigrant group arrived. These sources are unreliable in understanding what Five Points was really like, but they capture the public attitudes and responses to the arrival of immigrants more broadly. The neglected voices of European immigrants reveal that they viewed their own experience vastly different from the dramatized, outsider accounts, and actually *chose* to live in Five Points far beyond the possibility of moving elsewhere. Viewing Five Points through the perspective of slumming allows a more refined framework to navigate these differences between what it was, and what it seemed to be.

It is imperative that historians continue to disentangle the projected anxieties and literary tropes from the lived experiences of Five Points residents. Only then can we fully appreciate the rich history of culture, struggle, and triumph that once defined this storied neighborhood. Otherwise, it would almost be forgotten that the intersection of present-day Park, Worth, and Baxter Streets was once considered the most notorious slum in America.

* * *

Walking through present-day Five Points, there are few reminders of the reputation it once held. Tourists no longer come to witness beggars, bar fights, tenement buildings, or landmarks of crime. Instead, they come to experience the bright colors, lights, and melange of food in what is now known as Chinatown and Little Italy. Although the crime-stained history of Five Points would not be visible today, it is still appreciated for the cultural and ethnic vibrancies of the immigrant groups that transformed it.

These images offer a juxtaposition against the photographic and literary depictions of a bygone era.¹⁸⁷ Where once stood crowded tenements and bustling marketplaces, we now see a landscape totally evolved:



Collect Pond (Park)



Mulberry Street from Five Points Intersection



Five Points Intersection



The Old Brewery & Five Points Mission

¹⁸⁷ The captions reflect where these nineteenth-century establishments were once located, but their original infrastructure has been replaced.



Peter McLoughlin's tenement & Shaarey Zedek Synagogue on Pearl Street



Pete William's Saloon from Columbus Park



Jacob Riis, Mulberry Street¹⁸⁸



Present-day Mulberry Street

¹⁸⁸ Jacob Riis, "Mulberry Street," ca. 1900, Museum of the City of New York.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Atwill, Joseph F. *The Crisis! An Appeal to Our Countrymen on the Subject of Foreign Influence in the United States!*. New York: No. 201 Broadway, 1844.

“A Visit to the Five Points.” *Louisville Morning Courier*, December, 1848.

Barnard, William F. *Forty Years at the Five Points: A Sketch of the Five Points House of Industry*. New York: 1893.

Bobo, William. *Glimpses of New-York City, by a South Carolinian*. Charleston: Gale, Sabin Americana, 1852.

Bridges, Horace. *On Becoming an American; Some Meditations of a Newly Naturalized Immigrant*. Boston: Marshall Jones Company, 1919.

Busey, Samuel. *Immigration: Its Evils and Consequences*. New York: De Witt & Davenport, 1856.

Campbell, Helen. *Darkness and Daylight, or Lights and Shadows of New York Life*. New York: A.D. Worthington & Co., 1896.

Clay, Cassius. “The Five Points”, *The Baltimore Sun*, 1854.

C.L.. “A Scene in Five Points.” *New York Daily Times*, April, 1853.

“‘Cornelius’ to the Editor.” *Evening Post*, September, 1826.

Counsel for Emigrants, and Interesting Information from Numerous Sources. Aberdeen: John Mathison, 1838.

Dickens, Charles, *American Notes*. London: Chapman & Hall, 1913.

— —. *Oliver Twist*. London: Richard Bently, 1838.

“Doing the Slums.” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, December, 1885.

Findlater, Jane. "The Slum Movement in Fiction." *The National Review* 207, no. 35 (1900): 447-454.

"Five Points, New York." *True Democrat, A Prisoner's Friend: A Monthly Magazine Devoted to Criminal Reform, Philosophy, Science, Literature, and Art*, December, 1853.

Foster, G. G., *New York By Gas-Light with Here and There A Streak of Sunshine*. New York: Dewitt & Davenport, 1850.

Gerhard, Frederick. *The Dark Side of New York Life and its Criminal Classes: From Fifth Avenue Down to the Five Points; a Complete Narrative of the Mysteries of New York*. New York: 1873.

"Italian Life in New York." *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, April, 1888.

Kallmeyer, Charles. *How to Become a Citizen of the United States of America*. New York: Kallmeyer Pub. Co., 1917.

McCabe, James. *Lights and Shadows of New York Life*. Philadelphia: National Publishing Co., 1872.

"N.Y.C., Collect Pond." 1880. The New York Public Library Digital Collections.

Preston, Paul. "On Five Points." *New York Clipper*, October 6, 1868.

Riis, Jacob. *How the Other Half Lives*. New York, 1890. Library of Congress: Jacob Riis Collection.

— —. *The Battle With the Slum*. New York, 1902.

"Slumming in This Town." *New York Times*, January, 1884.

Smith, Matthew Hale. *Sunshine and Shadow in New York*. Hartford: J.B. Burr & Co., 1868.

"Subway training Helps in Warfare: A Host of Italian Laborers Are Making Good Use of Their Experience in Active Work." *New York Times*, August, 1916.

The Five Points House of Industry, *The Five Points Monthly Record* 1, no. 1 (March 1, 1854).

American Antiquarian Society.

— —. *The Five Points Monthly Record* 1, no. 2 (May 1, 1885).

— —. *Monthly Record of the Five Points House of Industry* 1, no. 6 (October 1, 1857).

— —. *Monthly Record of the Five Points House of Industry* 2, no. 14 (May 1, 1858).

“The Five Points Intersection.” ca. 1867. New York Historical Society.

“‘The Five Points’: What It Was and What It Is.” *New York Times*, March, 1896.

The Old Brewery and the Mission House at the Five Points. New York: Stringer and Townsend, 1854.

“Walks Among the New-York Poor: The Organ Grinders.” *New York Times*, February, 1853.

Whitman, Walt. “Walt Whitman to Henry Hurt.” October, 1868. The Walt Whitman Archive.

Wells, Samuel. *New Physiognomy*. New York: 1866.

Secondary Sources

Anbinder, Tyler. *Five Points: The 19th Century New York City Neighborhood that Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum*. New York: Free Press, 2001.

— —. “From Famine to Five Points: Lord Landsowne’s Irish Tenants Encounter North America’s Most Notorious Slum.” *American Historical Review* 107, no. 2 (2002): 351-387.

— —. “‘We Will Dirk Every Mother’s Son of You’: Five Points and the Irish Conquest of New York Politics.” *Éire-Ireland* 36, no. 2 (2001): 29-46.

— —. “Moving Beyond ‘Rags to Riches’” New York’s Irish Famine Immigrants.” *The Journal of American History* 99, no. 3 (2012): 741-770.

- Asbury, Herbert. *Gangs of New York*. New York: Garden City Publishing, 1927.
- Baylor, Ronald. *Neighbors in Conflict: The Irish, Germans, Jews, and Italians of New York City*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019.
- Binder, Frederick. *All the Nations Under Heaven: An Ethnic and Racial History of New York City*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.
- Burrows, Edwin. *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*. London: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Cohen, Erik. "Tourism-related Crime: Towards a Sociology of Crime and Tourism." *Visions in Leisure and Business* 16, no. 1 (1997), 4-13.
- Dowling, Robert. *Slumming in New York: From the Waterfront to Mythic Harlem*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007.
- Duncan, Jason. *Citizens or Papists?: The Politics of Anti-Catholicism in New York 1685-1821*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.
- Eagan, Catherine M. "'White,' If 'Not Quite': Irish Whiteness in the Nineteenth-Century Irish-American Novel." *Éire-Ireland* 36, no. 1 (2001): 66-81.
- Fitts, Robert. "'The Rhetoric of Reform: The Five Points Missions and the Cult of Domesticity.'" *Historical Archaeology* 35, no. 3 (2001): 115-132.
- Gassan, Richard. "The First American Tourist Guidebooks: Authorship and the Print Culture of the 1820s." *Book History* 8 (2005): 51-74.
- Haag, Pamela. "The 'Ill-Use of a Wife': Patterns of Working-Class Violence in Domestic and Public New York City, 1860-1880." *Journal of Social History* 25 (1992): 447-477.
- Harris, Leslie. *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Heap, Chad. *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940*.

Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Ignatiev, Noel. *How the Irish Became White*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

Jensen, Lauren. "The Photographs of Jacob Riis: History in Relation to Truth." *Constructing the Past* 5, no. 6 (2004): 1-10.

Koven, Seth. *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

Kraut, Alan. *Silent Travelers: Germs, Genes, and the "Immigrant Menace"*. Baltimore: University of Maryland Press, 1995.

Lee, J.J. & Casey, Marion. *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States*. New York: New York University Press, 2005.

Lubove, Roy. *The Progressive and the Slums: Tenement House Reform in New York City, 1890-1917*. Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962.

Lui, Mary Ting Yi. *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery: Murder, Miscegenation, and Other Dangerous Encounters in Turn-of-the-Century New York City*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

Moran, Gerard. "Retaining Their Irish Identity: Marriage and the Famine Irish in Five Points, New York, in the 1850s." *New Hibernia Review* 25, no. 3 (2021): 111-125.

O'Donnell, Edward. "Pictures vs. Words? Public History, Tolerance, and the Challenge of Jacob Riis." *The Public Historian* 26, no. 3 (2004): 7-26.

Peiss, Kathy. *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986.

- Quirke, Carol. "Picturing the Poor: Jacob Riis's Reform Photography." *Reviews in American History* 36, no. 4 (2008): 557-565.
- Reckner, Paul. "Remembering Gotham: Urban Legends, Public History, and Representations of Poverty, Crime, and Race in New York City." *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 6, no. 2 (2002): 95-112.
- Roediger, David. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. London: Verso, 2007.
- Sante, Luc. *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York*. New York: Farrar, 1991.
- Scorsese, Martin. *GANGS OF NEW YORK*. USA/Italy: Miramax, 2002.
- Stansell, Christine. *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*. Urbana: University of Illinois, 1987.
- Wilentz, Sean. *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850*. London: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Yamin, Rebecca. "Introduction: Becoming New York: The Five Points Neighborhood." *Historical Archaeology* 35, no. 3 (2001): 1-5.
- —. "Lurid Tales and Homely Stories of New York's Notorious Five Points." *Historical Archaeology* 32, no. 1 (1998): 74-85.