

# FIVE POINTS

NEW YORK'S IRISH WORKING CLASS IN THE 1850s



## Viewer's Guide to the 30-minute documentary by the American Social History Project

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The story of 1850s New York City and its notorious immigrant slum district, the Five Points, is seen through the conflicting perspectives of a native born Protestant reformer and an Irish-Catholic family. Through these personal stories, the *Five Points* documentary chronicles the daily life of a lower Manhattan working-class neighborhood, the labor and culture of Irish immigrants, and their role in the rise of pre-Civil War America's great cities.

Visit the ASHP website for more information: [www.ashp.cuny.edu](http://www.ashp.cuny.edu)

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## THE *WHO BUILT AMERICA?* MATERIALS

*Five Points* and nine other documentaries are a part of the *Who Built America?* series, which explores the central role working women and men played in key events and developments of American History. See also the two-volume *Who Built America?* textbook, *Freedom's Unfinished Revolution*, a high school text on the Civil War and Reconstruction, and the *WBA?* interactive CD-ROM.

Complete list of *WBA?* documentaries:

*History: The Big H*— This film-noir detective story introduces the history of working people and the challenge of understanding the past.



*Tea Party Etiquette*— Boston shoemaker George Robert Twelves Hewes narrates his experience of the Boston Tea Party, Boston Massacre, and the American Revolution.

*Daughters of Free Men*— Lucy Hall leaves her New England farm to work in the Lowell textile mills of the 1830s and confronts a new world of opportunity and exploitation.

*Five Points*— The story of 1850s New York City and its notorious immigrant slum district, the Five Points, is seen through the conflicting perspectives of a native born Protestant reformer and an Irish-Catholic family.

*Doing As They Can*— A fugitive woman slave describes her life, work, and day-to-day resistance on a North Carolina cotton plantation during the 1840s and 1850s.

*Dr. Toer's Amazing Magic Lantern Show*— The struggle to realize the promise of freedom following the Civil War is told by ex-slave J.W. Toer and his traveling picture show.

*1877: The Grand Army of Starvation*— In the summer of 1877 eighty thousand railroad workers went on strike and hundreds of thousands soon followed. The Great Uprising began a new era of conflict about equality in the industrial age.

*Savage Acts: Wars, Fairs and Empire*— The story of the Philippine War (1899-1902) and turn-of-the-century world's fairs reveal the links between everyday life in the U.S. and the creation of a new expansionist foreign policy.

*Heaven Will Protect the Working Girl*— Framed by the 1909 New York shirtwaist strike, this program presents a panoramic portrait of immigrant working women in the turn-of-the-century city.

*Up South: African-American Migration in the Era of the Great War*— Narrated by a Mississippi barber and a sharecropper woman, *Up South* tells the dramatic story of African-American migration to industrial cities during World War I.

# WHO LIVED IN THE FIVE POINTS? AND WHY DID THEY RIOT ON THE 4TH OF JULY?



"View from the 'Dead Rabbit' barricade in Bayard Street . . ." The 1857 riot in the Five Points neighborhood was presented in the press as a battle between the rival "Dead Rabbit" and "Bowery Boys" gangs.

Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, July 18, 1857

**O**n July 4, 1857, a bloody riot erupted in the notorious "Five Points" neighborhood of New York City. Hundreds of people were drawn into the street battle. Clubs, stones, and firearms left a dozen people dead and many more seriously injured.

"RIOTING AND BLOODSHED" read the *New York Times*. "THE CITY UNDER ARMS!" The *Times* and other newspapers blamed the riot on the "wild, untrained natures" of the Irish immigrants and other "ignorant scoundrels" who lived in the Five Points.

Many New Yorkers of the 1850s saw poor Irish immigrants as mindless brutes. But the Irish themselves saw things differently. The *Five Points* documentary looks at life in this immigrant neighborhood through the eyes of an Irish family, the Mulvahills, and a New York reformer, the Reverend Louis Pease. Their contrasting viewpoints help us see the July 4th riot not as meaningless violence, but as a symptom of larger social and cultural tensions in America's past.



Photographs of Irish immigrants in the 1850s are rare. The *Five Points* program uses engravings published in newspapers and books of the period. Many of these drawings reveal prejudice against the Irish. ASHP artists tinted and occasionally retouched illustrations to draw attention to stereotypes. (See "Seeing is Believing" for more about pictures.)

Thomas Nast, *Harper's Weekly*

# WHO MAKES HISTORY?

**T**oday, Irish-Americans are found at all levels in American society. But in the 1850s most Irish immigrants were among the poorest of Americans.

The history of those at the bottom of American society is rarely told. And when history books discuss the poor, they often reflect the views of those at the top of society. But to understand how America has grown and changed, we need to see history from all points of view.

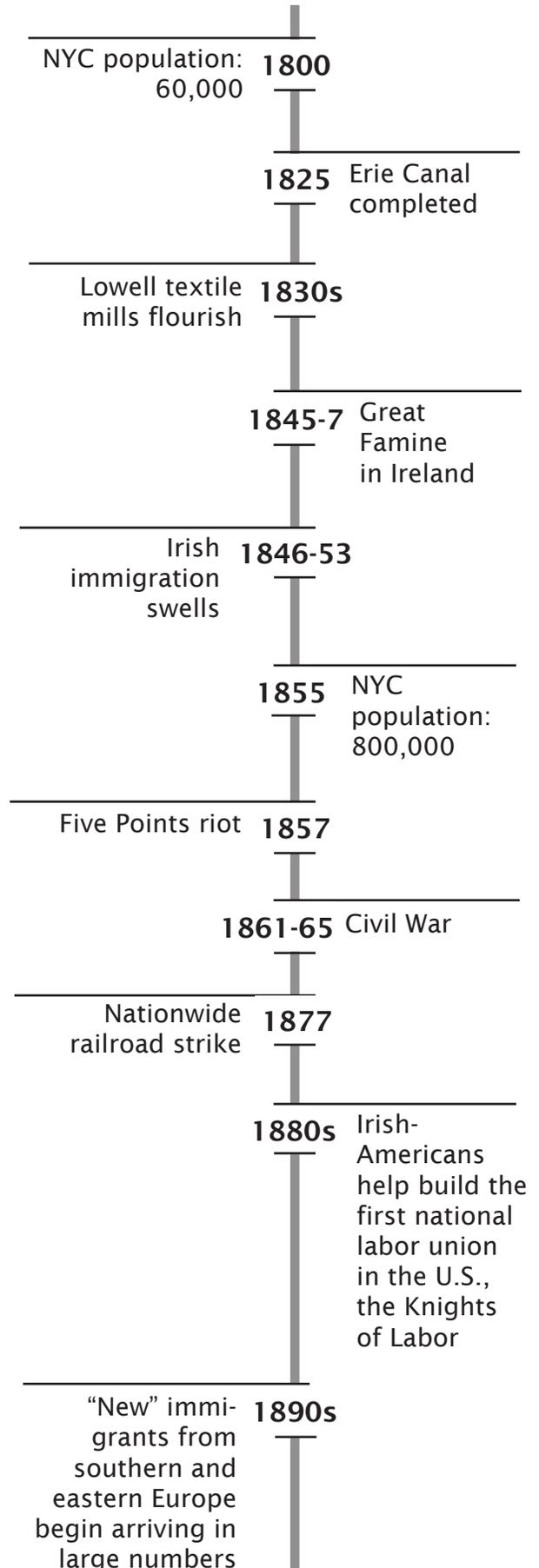
The story of immigrant Irish working people can be told through letters they left behind, newspaper reports, and official data such as the census. The Mulvahills are a fictional family based on such information; Reverend Pease is a real historical figure. Put side-by-side, their stories help us envision the new world emerging in America in the 1850s, when the industrial revolution had just begun and the great cities of the East were growing in size. Through the story of the Five Points, we can see how immigrant working people helped shape a new urban America.



**"The Two-Penny Marriage Couple."**

There are few images of Irish immigrants from the mid-nineteenth century; this one was published in a book that promoted moral reform among the urban poor. This illustration appeared with the story of an Irish couple that approached Reverend Louis Pease of the Five Points Mission and asked him to marry them, which he did, despite his doubts about their sobriety and commitment to living a respectable life.

Solon Robinson, *Hot Corn: Life Scenes in New York Illustrated* (1854)



# THE WORLD THEY LEFT BEHIND

The story of New York's Irish immigrants begins in Ireland, a nation marked by material poverty and cultural wealth. Though the Irish had rich traditions of music and myth, family and faith, Irish society was economically stunted. Working for landowning gentry, Irish families survived on potatoes grown on tiny plots of rented land. Many lived in one-room, mudfloored huts.

Ireland's poverty was the result of English colonial rule. After completing the conquest of Ireland in 1691, the Protestant English took away Irish Catholics' land and



**"Ejection of Irish Tenantry."**

A wood engraving from an 1848 edition of the *Illustrated London News* depicts an eviction in Ireland, a common occurrence during the potato famine.

*The Illustrated London News*, December 16, 1848



**"Boy and Girl at Cahera."**

This image of starving children conveys the desperate circumstances that blighted potato crops and devastating famine brought to the Irish countryside.

*Illustrated London News*, February 20, 1847

limited their economic and political activity.

Young Catholics could not go to school unless they became Protestants. In Northern Ireland, the English imported Scottish Protestants to rule Catholics. English power guaranteed that Ireland would serve England as a source of food and raw materials.

In the 1840s, several years of blight on the vital potato crop brought the Great Famine to Ireland. Weakened by two centuries of English rule, Irish society could not respond to the crisis. More than a million Irish men, women and children died in the Famine. Landlords and English laws evicted at least half a million more from their homes. Between 1845 and 1855 over two million Irish fled to America, where they hoped to find work, security, and freedom from English rule.

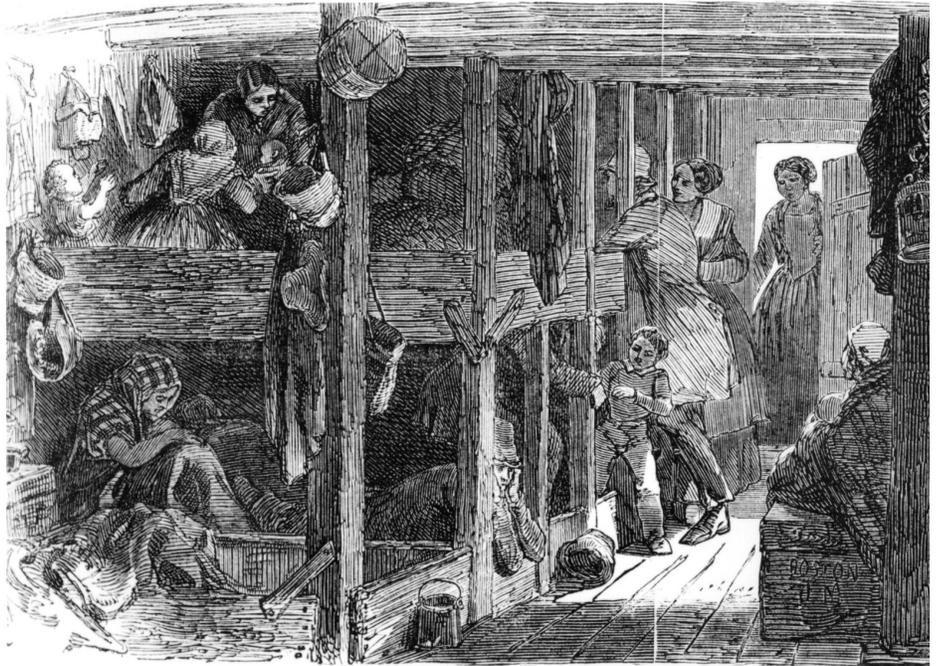
*"They were like walking skeletons, men stamped with the livid mark of hunger, children crying with pain, women too weak to stand ...."*

—ENGLISH OBSERVER  
W.E. FOSTER, 1847

# WHAT'S NEW ABOUT THE NEW WORLD?

To reach the United States, the Irish spent five to ten weeks packed in dank ships' holds with little heat or sanitation. On the worst ships, some of which had once been slave ships, half of the immigrants died on board. Those who survived faced a new challenge—adapting to a bewildering, changing America. “We are a primitive people, wandering in a strange land called the Nineteenth Century,” one immigrant wrote to his family.

The 1840s and 1850s were years of great change and expansion in America. Small farmers settled the Midwest and slave plantations spread across the Mississippi. Canals and new railroads linked these new territories with the great cities growing in the East. Increased



“Emigration Vessel.—Between Decks.”  
Ships carrying Irish immigrants were known as “coffin ships.” Why?

*Illustrated London News, May 10, 1851*

trade and the spreading industrial system changed the way Americans worked and lived. In 1790, America had only 24 towns of 2,500 or more residents, and none larger than 50,000. By 1860, Bos-

ton and Philadelphia had grown dramatically, while Chicago and Detroit and other new cities were springing up. New York became the nation's largest city, with more than a million residents, nearly half of them immigrants or their children.

New York City symbolized the dynamic forces changing America. The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 helped shift the flow of trade to New York. Goods from across the country were brought to New York to be shipped around the world. New manufacturing sprang up; by 1860, garments made in New York had replaced homemade clothing in most parts of the nation.



“Bird's eye view of New-York & Brooklyn.”  
This 1851 map shows the rapidly growing cities of New York and Brooklyn.

Library of Congress

# UPTOWN, DOWNTOWN

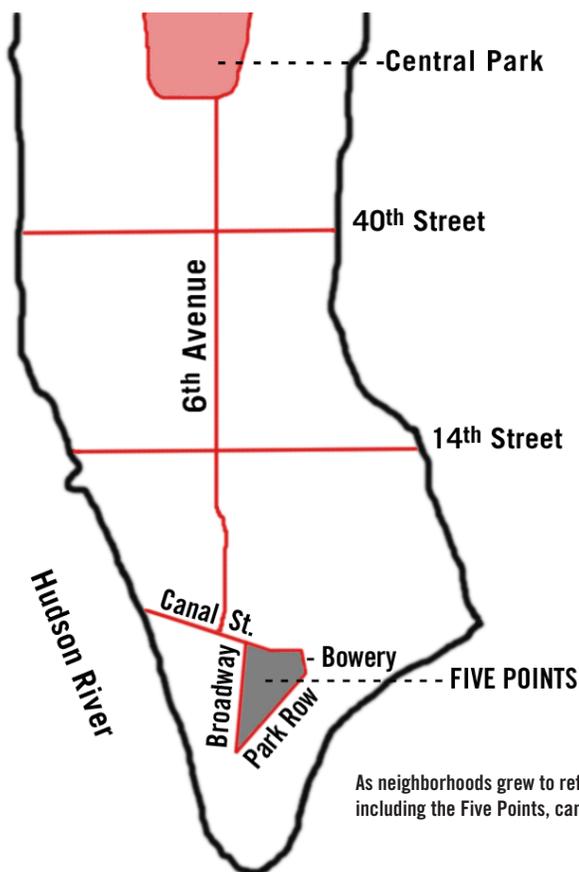
New York City's growing economy and swelling population led to a building boom. The city expanded uptown, reaching 42nd Street around 1850. Department stores, tenements, Fifth Avenue mansions and other features of the modern city began to appear. Work on Central Park, which New Yorkers still treasure, began in 1857.

As the city prospered and grew, it began to divide. In the old "walking city," rich and poor had lived in the same areas. But now the rich and the emerging "genteel" middle class tried to separate themselves from poor and working people.

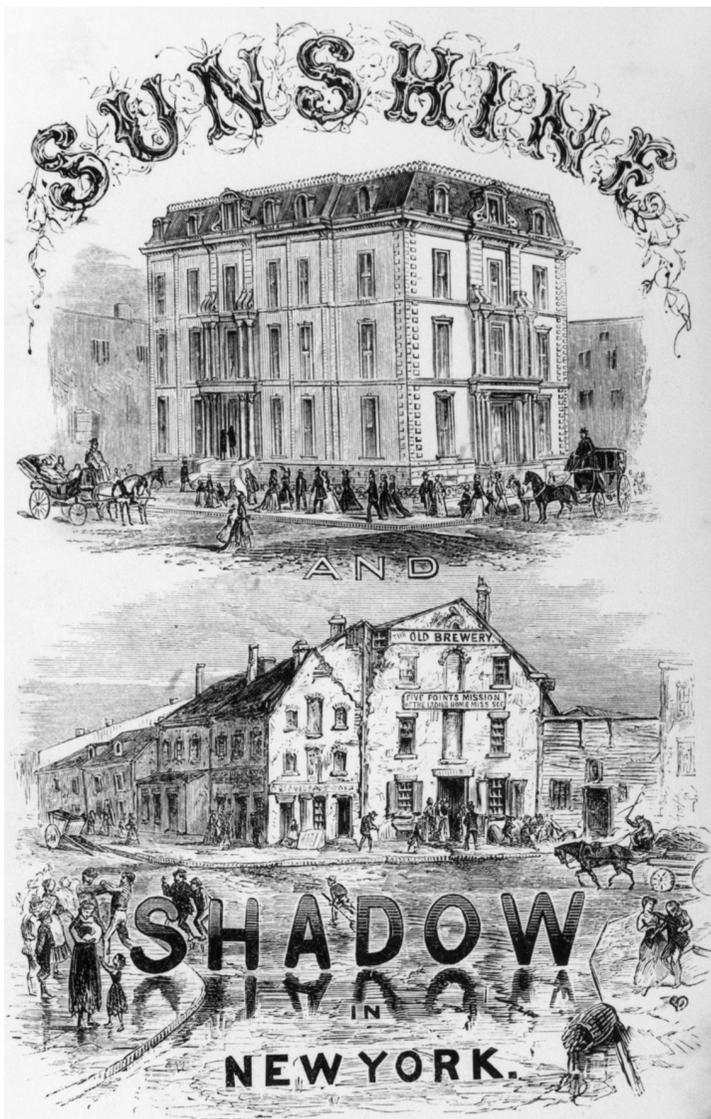
Creating a "proper" home was important to the genteel. They saw the home as the correct place for women and children, a sanctuary from the increasingly harsh, competitive world of business. They developed what they saw as proper table manners, the proper way to raise children, and other customs we now take for granted.

The genteel, most of whom were native-born Protestants, prided themselves on being different from the poor. Poverty, they said, was caused by a person's immorality and lack of self-control. The genteel were very critical of poor Irish Catholics, whose faith was seen as proof of their backward ways.

The growth of the city's first major slum, the Five Points, horrified Protestant reformers such as Reverend Pease; one reformer called it "a nest of vipers." Some reformers "saved" immigrant children by taking them away from their parents and putting them in Protestant foster homes.



As neighborhoods grew to reflect economic status, the 6th Ward, including the Five Points, came to be known as the home of poor Irish.



"Sunshine and Shadow." Mid-nineteenth-century publications presented the East's industrializing cities, such as New York, as fractured societies. According to articles, novels, and city guides, New York was really two cities: one orderly, prosperous, and bathed in "sunlight," the other menacing, poor, and steeped in "darkness."

Matthew Hale Smith, *Sunshine and Shadow in New York* (1866)

# LIFE AND LABOR IN THE FIVE POINTS

Though the genteel looked down on them, immigrants like the Mulvahills were actually crucial to New York's prosperity. Irish and German immigrant labor powered the city's physical and economic growth in the 1840s and 1850s.

Irish-American workmen like Mike Mulvahill dug the Erie Canal, laid the city streets, and built Central Park. Shipping, which made New York the nation's leading

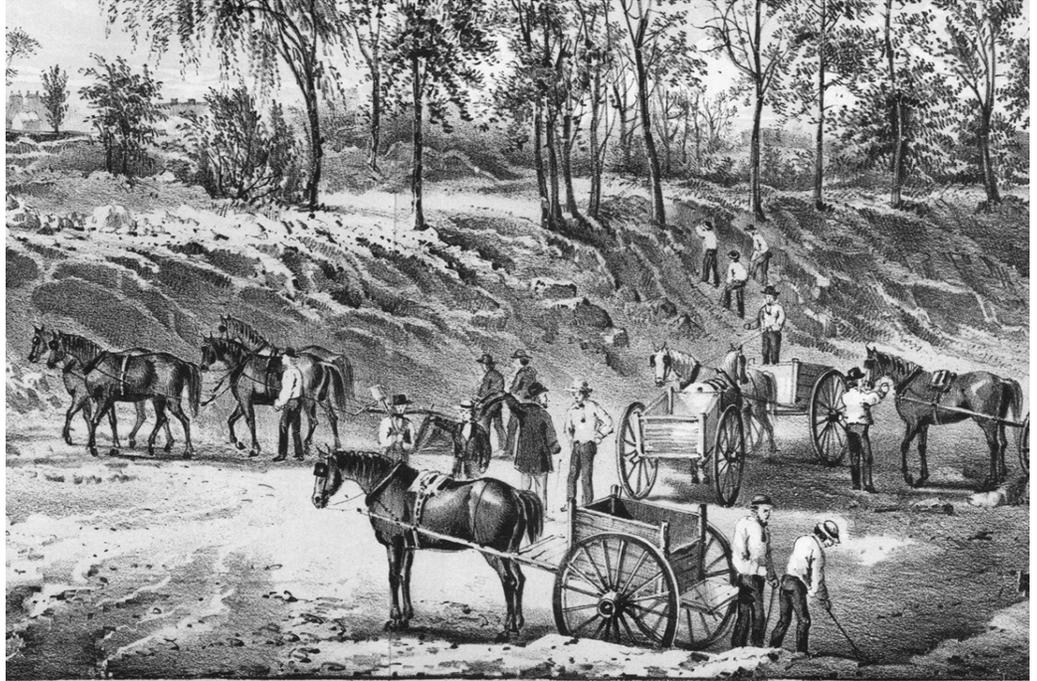
port, depended on immigrants to work the docks. Competing with New England, New York manufacturing won out, because of the cheap labor supplied by immigrant workers.



**Sewing Women.**

New York's clothing industry relied on immigrant women like Mary Mulvahill and her daughter to sew shirts at home. They earned about 6 cents per shirt. Working hard, they could sew four shirts a day. When middle-class women, like the one depicted here, fell upon hard economic times their peers saw as tragic and disgraceful their need to sew for wages just as poor women did.

*Harper's Weekly*, January 2, 1858



**Building Central Park.**

This lithograph detail shows workers, largely Irish and German immigrants, removing stone and dirt to begin the landscaping of Central Park.

*Valentine's Manual*, 1859

British, German, and earlier Irish immigrants came to America with skills such as shoemaking or printing. But most Famine-era Irish immigrants had no skills. Many spoke no English, and most faced anti-Catholic prejudice. Irish men had to take the city's dirtiest and most dangerous jobs.

Unskilled laborers earned about \$5.00 per week, or about \$250 per year. During the economic depressions of 1854 and 1857 their income was even lower. Yet the bare minimum needed to support a family of four was \$600 per year. Though Irish immigrants helped create the city's new wealth, they shared in few of the rewards.

*"i wish i ner cam to new york. it is a hell on erth."*

—ANNE KENNEDY'S LETTER TO IRELAND, 1858

**I**n genteel households, only men worked for wages. But in Irish poor and working-class households, everybody had to work to make ends meet. Wives did sewing and took in boarders. Children worked as errand runners, newsboys and “scavengers,” finding old clothes and other discarded items to sell to junk dealers. Reformers saw such unsupervised street activity as proof of the immorality of the poor.

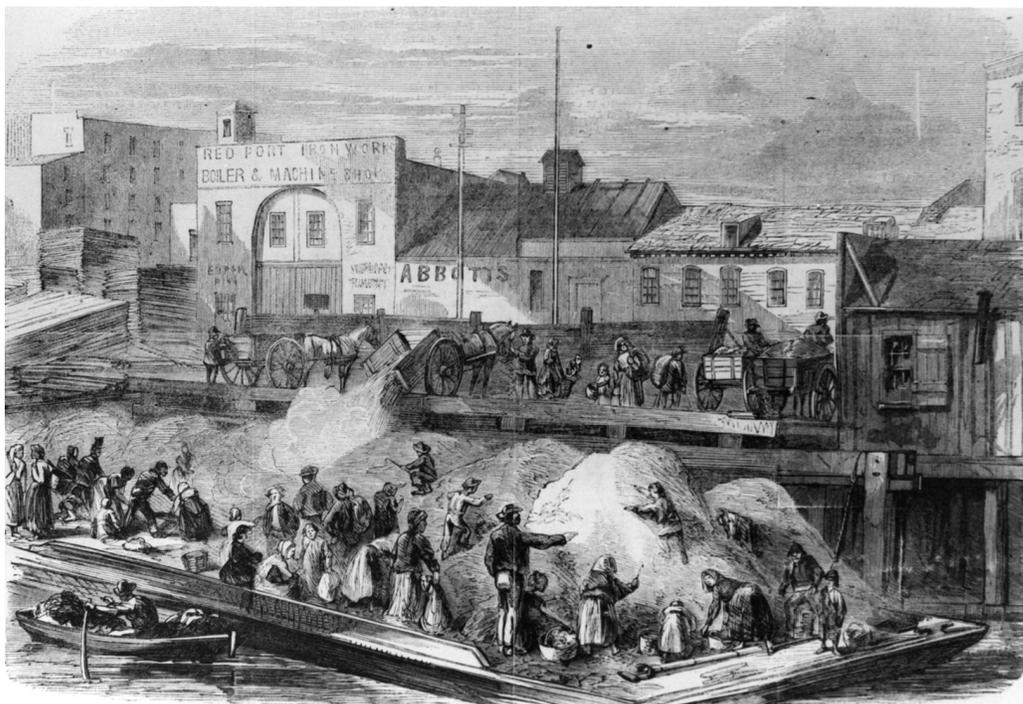
Rapid population growth made housing scarce in New York City. Since they could not afford good housing, Irish working people lived in the city’s worst tenements. Families of six or eight crowded into tiny two-room apartments. Thousands had to live in damp, dark cellars. Competition for housing and jobs heightened hostility between the Irish and the city’s small free black population.

Genteel homes had running water by the 1850s, but tenements did not. Immigrant women had to carry all cooking, cleaning, and drinking water up from the street in pails. Children helped with this task, and with gathering fuel for cooking and heating fires. Poor and working-class women faced lives of endless scrimping, scraping, and borrowing.



**At work in America.**  
Teenaged Irish-American girls worked as cooks, housekeepers, and personal servants. Some earned more than their fathers did as laborers.

*Harper's Weekly*, January 2, 1858

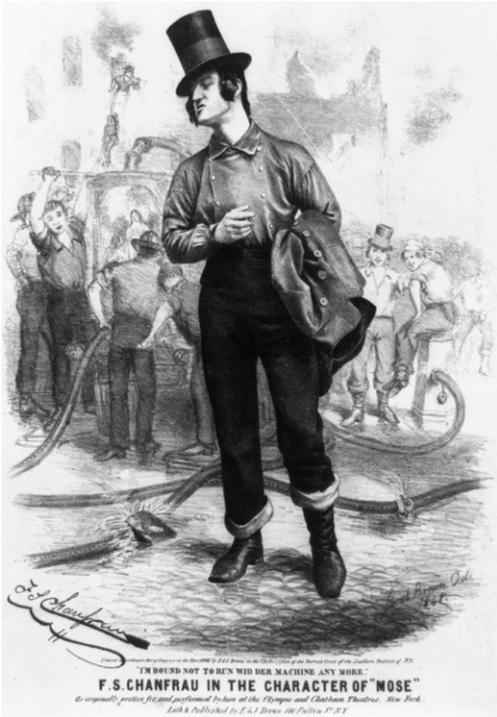


**“Dumping ground at the foot of Beach Street.”**

An 1866 engraving shows people scavenging on garbage barges, searching for coal, rags, and other discarded items that might be used or sold to junk dealers. The picture, according to a *Harper's Weekly* editor, showed how some people in New York “live upon the refuse of respectable folk.”

*Harper's Weekly*, September 26, 1866

# STREET WISE



## Popular Theatre in the Five Points.

The character of Mose, featured in this handbill, was a popular theatrical staple in New York during the 1850s. A volunteer fire fighter, or "fire laddie," Mose was a larger-than-life character who thrilled working-class Bowery audiences with his street fighting and fire rescue exploits.

Library of Congress

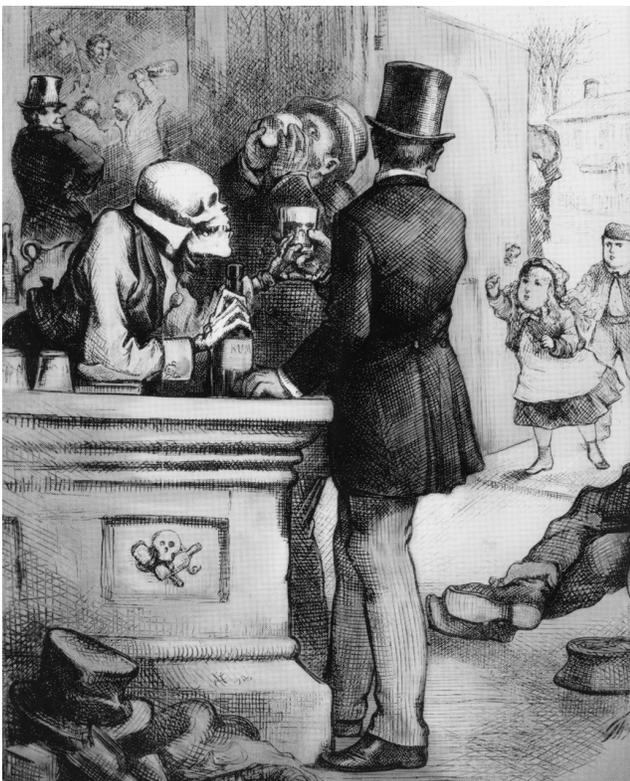
Despite their harsh lives, Five Points residents sought ways to enjoy and express themselves. With little space at home, Irish working people spent much of their free time on the streets. Irish traditions helped shape a robust public culture which included saloons, dancehalls, rough sports, and theater.

The Catholic Church guided the lives of some Irish immigrants. But in pre-Famine Ireland, rural folk had not been regular churchgoers, and Famine immigrants did not quickly embrace the U.S. Catholic church.

The Irish joined crowds of native-born working people who cheered *Hamlet* and *Mose the Bowery Boy*. Coming from a culture rich with music, Irish working men and women also enjoyed dance halls. Irish songs and beautiful fiddle melodies shaped the growth of American popular music.

Though expressive and vital, working-class culture was also bloody. Dog fighting was popular, as was bare-knuckle boxing. Drinking and fighting were central elements of working-class manhood. Working men went to saloons to meet friends, talk politics, and find out about jobs. Alcoholism and related family violence were unhappy features of life in the Five Points.

As the genteel separated themselves from working people, they rejected the culture of the streets. Valuing propriety and self-control, they condemned the saloon, with its public drinking, and the rowdiness of working-class theater, music, and sports.

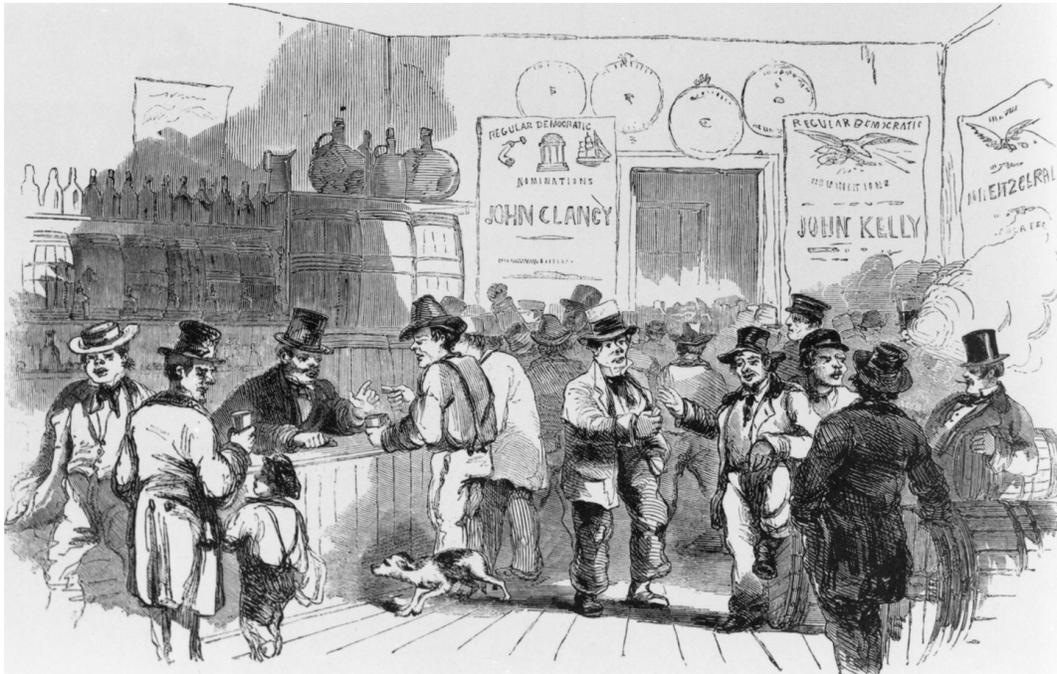


## Two Views of a Saloon.

An 1870s cartoon by Thomas Nast in *Harper's Weekly* expresses a genteel, pro-temperance view of a saloon. The same cartoon, altered by ASHP artists, suggests the way a saloon may have been seen by working men who socialized.

"Bar of Destruction," *Harper's Weekly*, March 21, 1874. Right: altered by American Social History Project.

# THE MANLY ART OF POLITICS



## “The Voting-Place.”

Evangelical reformers objected to the undisciplined and sometimes violent atmosphere of working-class saloons. But, as indicated in this 1858 *Harper's Weekly* engraving of a bar in the Five Points, reformers' concern involved more than the excesses of public drinking. The saloons were the organizing centers for the reformers' rivals, urban political machines like New York's Tammany Hall.

*Harper's Weekly*,  
November 13, 1858

**P**olitical activity was a key part of Irish working-class life. Famine-era immigrants' lack of economic resources limited the opportunities open to them. But through local politics, they found ways to advance themselves.

The New York Irish joined the Democratic Party and the Tammany Hall political club, and helped elect Fernando Wood as mayor. Irish votes helped Tammany become the nation's first urban "political machine."

At Tammany's core was the "ward boss," who delivered immigrants' votes to the Democrats. In return, the ward boss received "patronage"—city jobs for his local supporters. Ward bosses also gave out emergency aid and holiday charity, such as Christmas turkeys. The Irish accepted Tammany corruption because ward bosses provided concrete services to the community.

Irish communities grew in size and power in cities such as Boston, Chicago, and Detroit, as well as New York. Native-born working people responded with hostility. In the 1840s, "nativist" rioters burned Catholic churches and killed Irish immigrants in Philadelphia and elsewhere. In the 1850s, nativist working men joined the genteel in a national anti-immigrant political party, the "Know Nothings." While this party quickly collapsed, nativist activity continued, fueling the growth of the new Republican Party.

*"i am not here 2 years until next spring, and yet i had the honor of voting at the last 2 elections..."*

—PATRICK DUNNEY,  
LETTER HOME TO IRELAND, 1856

# “THE FIVE POINTS RULES THE WORLD!”



“Scene at the Five Points Riot. Women and men throwing brickbats down on the police.” Women, as well as men, participated in the 1857 riot.

*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, July 18, 1857*

**I**n 1857, New York City’s native-born elite used the Republican-controlled New York State Assembly to try to oust Mayor Wood and force genteel behavior on the Irish working poor. Their efforts led to the Five Points riot of 1857.

The State Assembly passed two laws in April 1857. The first law disbanded the New York City police department, a Tammany stronghold. To take police power away from Mayor Wood, the Assembly created a new unit, the Metropolitan Police, which would answer only to the Assembly.

The Metropolitan Police was also created to enforce the Assembly’s second law, which reduced the number of licensed saloons in the city, limited the amount a person could drink, and closed all saloons on Sundays.

Many Irish working people saw these laws as a direct attack on their way of life. Some Five Points residents decided to resist. On Sunday, July 4th, the first day the laws took effect, Five Pointers celebrated Independence Day with saloons open and full, as was traditional. When the Metropolitan Police tried to enter the neighborhood, the Five Points riot began.

The July 4th riot began with fists and rocks and escalated to include clubs and guns. On one side there was the Irish of the Five Points, led by a gang of young working men known as the “Dead Rabbits.” On the other side was the Metropolitan Police and a gang of native-born working men called the “Bowery Boys.” After hours of battling, which left scores injured and twelve dead, the fighting slowly subsided.

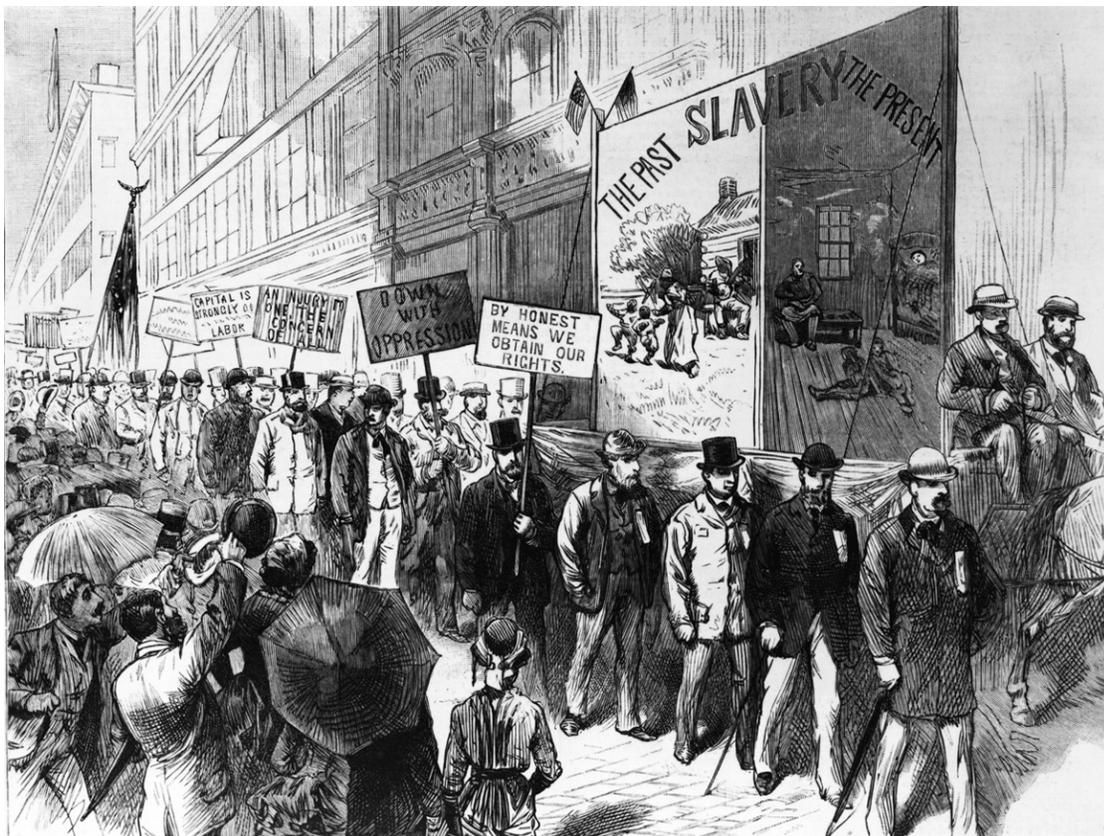
# AFTER THE BATTLE

**"The Great Labor Parade of September 1st"**

By the late nineteenth century, the majority of trade union members in major cities were men of Irish descent.

*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, September 13, 1884*

A few years after the Five Points Riot, the Civil War began. Though they protested violently against unfair draft laws, tens of thousands of Irish men volunteered and fought bravely in the Union Army. After the war, while Irish immigration continued, the Irish-American working class underwent important changes.



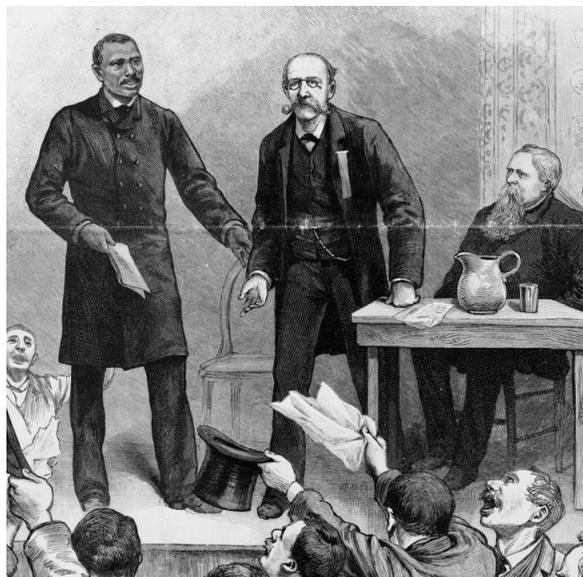
Irish-American working men gained in skill and began to build alliances with native-born working men. When the labor movement revived in the 1870s and 1880s, Irish-American men played key roles as leaders, organizers, and members of the rank and file.

Irish traditions of militancy and solidarity helped shape American unions in the late nineteenth century.

Irish-American workers drew on their experience of English oppression to confront new problems caused by the growing power of American industrial capitalism. Irish-American labor activists linked the call for Ireland's freedom with a demand for equality for American workers.

The 1870s and 1880s saw other changes as well. The Irish joined the American Catholic church in increasing numbers. Through political machines, some Irish men won positions in City Hall and in police and fire departments around the country. Other Irish men helped form alternative workers' parties to fight political corruption.

While Irish-American working-class communities grew in strength, new immigrant groups began arriving in New York and other cities. In the 1890s, as America grew ever more urban and industrial, millions of Italians, Jews, Poles, and other Eastern European immigrants joined the Irish in the new American working class. Separately and together, immigrants would draw on their various traditions to meet the challenges of urban life in industrial America.



**Terence Powderly.**

Powderly (center) was the Irish-born head of the Knights of Labor, which emerged as America's first large national union in the 1880s.

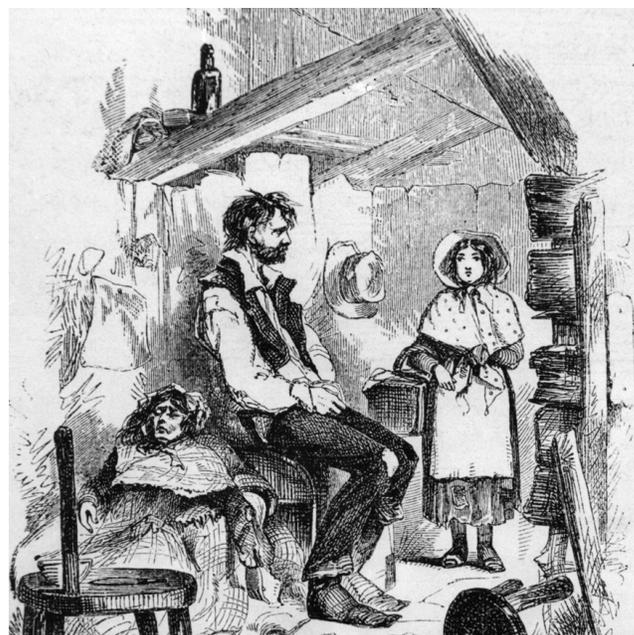
*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, October 16, 1886*

# SEEING IS BELIEVING?



Some poor people were shown as poor but deserving. This picture shows a hardworking, frugal, widowed mother of three. Once proud, misfortune has brought her down. The artist wants the viewer to be sympathetic to her plight.

*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, November 18, 1865*



The second category of pictures shows poor people who, by the genteel standards of the day, do not deserve sympathy. This picture contains the signs of self-ruin—dirt, drink, and laziness.

*Ladies of the Mission, The Old Brewery (1854)*

**T**he *Five Points* DVD uses illustrations of immigrant working-class life originally published in nineteenth-century books and newspapers. This visual record is rich but erratic. Most illustrated publications were aimed not at working people but at the genteel. The artists who created these illustrations tended to portray poor people in one of two ways.

Though such pictures are useful in envisioning and understanding the past, we must examine them with a careful, critical eye. They portray one group's interpretation of reality and not another's. Imagine what it was like to be a poor Irish person confronted with only these types of images.

## "The Day We Celebrate."

*Harper's Weekly* cartoonist Thomas Nast depicts a riot in New York on St. Patrick's Day, 1867.

Nast's portrayal of the Irish, baring their teeth along with other weaponry, was typical—nineteenth-century cartoonists gave each immigrant working-class group the physical traits supposedly characteristic of its "race" and place in the social hierarchy.

"The Day We Celebrate," *Harper's Weekly*, April 6, 1867



# LEARN MORE ABOUT *FIVE POINTS*

## Scholarly Works

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* (2001)

Drawing from letters, diaries, newspapers, bank records, police reports, and archeological digs, Anbinder explores nineteenth-century perceptions of the neighborhood as a vice-ridden slum and lays out a more realistic, and fascinating, portrait of the neighborhood and its residents.

Kevin Baker, *Paradise Alley* (2002)

This well-researched historical novel brings the reader into the Five Points during the 1863 New York City draft riots, weaving the story of three Irish immigrant women into the events of several turbulent days.

Daniel Cassidy, *How the Irish Invented Slang: The Secret Language of the Crossroads* (2007)

This essay collection traces the ways that nineteenth-century Irish America shaped contemporary language and culture.

Kevin Kenny, *The American Irish: A History* (2000)

Kenny synthesizes historical scholarship on numerous aspects of the Irish experience from the eighteenth through late twentieth centuries, paying particular attention to the ways that Irish nationalism stimulated ongoing links across the Atlantic between Ireland and the United States.

## Websites

Uncovering the Five Points: Evidence from a New York City Immigrant Neighborhood

<http://www.ashp.cuny.edu/fivepoints/>

This ASHP site presents a searchable database of records from the New York State Census of 1855 for Block 160 in Manhattan's Five Points neighborhood. The site is an excellent way to introduce quantitative historical evidence to students.

Views of the Famine

<http://adminstaff.vassar.edu/sttaylor/FAMINE/>

This site offers images and articles on the famine in Ireland between 1845 and 1851, taken primarily from newspapers in London and Ireland.

The Five Points Site

<http://r2.gsa.gov/fivept/fphome.htm>

This virtual exhibit of a 1991 archaeological dig of the former Five Points area in lower Manhattan includes eight images of the excavation sites and more than 60 photos of artifacts, maps, contemporary images of the neighborhood, and recommended readings and links.

## CREDITS

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