New York's Mythic Slum

Digging lower Manhattan's infamous Five Points

By Rebecca Yamin


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In 1842 in American Notes for General Circulation, Charles Dickens' description of Five Points displays his horror and fear of a neighborhood he refused to visit without a police escort. In fact, his language was typical of middle-class observers, to whom working-class districts were threatening and alien places.

George Foster, a reporter for Horace Greeley's New York Tribune in the 1840s and 1850s, took readers on vicarious visits to every seedy corner of the city. Compiled in New York by Gas Light (1830), his sketch of Five Points begins at midnight and describes the inside of the Old Brewery, an industrial building that had been converted into one-room apartments:

Every room in every story has its separate family or occupant, rent- ing by the week or month and paying in advance. In this one room, the cooking, eating, and sleeping of the whole family and their visitors are performed. Yes, and their visitors, for it is a usual thing for a mother and her two or three daughters—all of course from ten to twenty—to receive their "own" at the same time in the same room.

While Dickens and Foster bear much of the responsibility for the image of Five Points that has come down to us, it was Herbert Asbury's The Gangs of New York (1927) that established Five Points as New York City's mythic slum. For Asbury, Five Points was the "cradle of gangs," where the Dead Rabbits, Plug Uglies, Shirt Tales, and Roach Guards were nurtured. Like others before him and some since, Asbury equated poverty with vice and corruption. "The gangster," he wrote, "was a product of his environment; poverty and disorganization of home and community brought him into being, and political corruption and all its attendant evils foster his growth."

Recent archaeological work at the site of a new federal courthouse at Foley Square in lower Manhattan uncovered a complex of foundation walls, courtyards, cellar floors, and backyard features that have dramatically changed our perception of this infamous neighborhood, named for the five points created by the intersection of three streets—Orange (now Baxter), Cross (now Park), and Anthony (now Worth). The courthouse was built on a block abutting the intersection to the southeast. Fourteen city lots within the block were investigated, and nearly one million artifacts were uncovered from 22 stone- or brick-lined privies and cesspools. Historical Conservation and Interpretation, a consulting firm in Newton, New Jersey, conducted the excavations; the analysis was undertaken by John Milner Associates (JMA) of Philadelphia under contract to the General Services Administration, a federal agency charged with constructing and managing government buildings.

The artifacts recovered from Five Points are mundane: toothbrushes, tea sets, thimbles, spotters, rice combs, matches, medicine bottles, and food remains. Yet they provide a fresh glimpse into the lives of the mostly immigrant residents of the overcrowded tenements on Pearl Street, the subdivided wooden shanties along Baxter Street, and the commercial establishments on Chatham Street. Sealed beneath a parking lot since the 1960s, when the last of the residential structures on the block was taken down, the artifacts are evidence of daily life in a place that until now has been portrayed as a living hell.

In the late eighteenth century the courthouse block was part of the industrial district that surrounded the Collect Pond, the city's largest body of fresh water. Pottery, rope walks, bakeries, breweries, tanneries, and slaughterhouses spewed noxious flames into the air and left their refuse along the banks of the pond. By the turn of the nineteenth century the Collect was so polluted that the Common Council called for it to be filled, a process begun in 1803. At least five tanneries were located on the block near what would have been the southeastern shore of the Collect Pond. During construction of a prisoners' transit tunnel connecting the Metropolitan Correctional Center on the south side of Pearl Street to the new courthouse on the north side, excavators found a tanning vat, a limbing pit for softening hides, animal bones, cattle horn cores, and an iron hook that would have been attached to a long wooden handle for moving hides around in the vat.

There were also bakers and brewers on the block. Tobias Hoffman, a German baker, lived with his family at 474 Pearl Street, and his oven was next door at 476. A wood-fired privy filled in at the time of Hoffman's death in 1812 yielded a sample of this artisan household's possessions. The Hoffmans set their table with elegant Chippendale porcelaines and fancy glassware—wine glasses with garlands and gauze in their stems and tumblers engraved with garlands of flowers. They had teaware for different occasions, some made of porcelain and some of hand-painted earthenware, and teapots made of white stoneware. A more personal item was a German-style porcelain smoking pipe, gilded with geometric and floral patterns on a cobalt blue background.

We know from census records that after her husband's death, the widow Hoffman headed the household on Pearl Street, renting out the bakery and taking in more boarders, including a doctor and two grocers. She also rented a back building on the lot to a stabler and his family, and some yard space to the cabinet and coffin maker next door. The privy built to serve these residents was filled in the 1830s, by which time many singlefamily houses such as the Hoffmans' had been subdivided into rental apartments to accommodate the city's bur-
When zooarchaeologists study animal bones from archaeological sites, they are usually examining the remains of past meals. Most of the bones recovered behind the tenements at Five Points were from fish, chicken, cows, and pigs, but there were also the remains of cats, dogs, rats, and other animal residents of the area. In a stone-lined privy on Baxter Street used by several Italian households, we identified the humerus, femur, scapula, and mandible of a monkey. Physical anthropologists Cliff Jolly and Terry Hanlon of New York University confirmed that we had recovered the remains of a male New World Cebus monkey. These bones were the first nonhuman primate remains recovered from a historic site in North America. But what was a monkey doing in a New York City tenement?

Italian migration to America began slowly in the 1860s, and a Little Italy gradually developed on the southern end of Mulberry Street. Federal census data and other documents place at least 50 Italian men and their families on this block in lower Manhattan in 1870. Thirty-nine of these men were employed as organ grinders. The stereotypical image of Italian men and boys became that of the street musician, grinding a hand-held organ and accompanied by a small monkey who collected coins from bystanders. According to Helen Campbell, a Victorian visitor to Five Points, organ grinders seldom owned either their organs or their monkeys. Organ grinders were paid for four dollars a month, and trained monkeys could be worth as much as 20 or 30 dollars. Monkey training schools were represented in Harper’s Weekly and elsewhere as violent places where the animals were mistreated.

By the 1890s Italians were the most visible immigrant population in lower Manhattan. By then only seven Italian men, or 0.7 percent of the 1,024-number of Italian men living on the block, still played music on the streets. Most of them had moved into commercial food trades or construction.

Pam Crabtree is a zooarchaeologist in the department of anthropology at New York University. Claudia Milne is a project archaeologist at John Miller Associates.

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There is other evidence that the 472 Pearl Street residents were able to treat and prevent disease. Parastologist Karl Reinhard of the University of Nebraska, working as a consultant to the police in the early 1900s, noted that privy deposits for the rowhouses contained pigs that caused trichinosis, or for diseases caused by tapeworms ingested with pork or beef. The large quantity of bone recovered from the privy deposits that made up a significant portion of the diet, but it was apparently cooked thoroughly enough to kill parasites. There is evidence, however, for whipworm and the Ascaris parasite, which comes from contaminated food and water, but these parasites were more prevalent in the remains from the later eighteenth-century households on the block than in those from the Irish tenements. The Irish evidently controlled Ascaris with oil of Chenoapoium, an extract made from Chenoapoium ambroside, a plant they may have grown on the lot or in pots indoors. Recently, the project ethnobotanist, has identified chenoapoia from soil samples taken during the excavation.

The many shapeless woolen rags recovered from the cesspool and restored to recognizable form by JMA conservators Gary McGowan and Cheryl LaRoche suggest how Irish women augmented their meager clothing purchased in New York’s needle trades. McGowan and LaRoche believe the women, who had easy access to the rags, collected them for recycling into shocky, a cloth made from the shredded wool of old cloth. They also speculate that the long strips of wood found were used to make hooked and braided rugs, probably for use in workers’ apartments. According to George Washington University historian Richard Scott’s study of personal letters written by workers in the early 1800s, workers’ pets were often the victims of needle points. The opportunity was the invitation to live in a style that seamstresses, laundresses, and maid could not afford.

Afternoon tea at the brothel was served on a set of China, soda lustre ware that included cups for coffee, saucers and plates, a soup bowl, and a tea caddie. Meals consisted of steak, veal, ham, soft-shell clams, and many kinds of fish. There was a greater variety of artifacts from the brothel than from the other excavated areas of the courthouse block. Heather Griggs, who is analyzing sewing remains, thinks the prostitutes used the contents of a sewing box—a stiletto for piercing holes in fabric or whitework, the bone handle of an embroidery tool, knitting needle covers, a thread winder, and bobbins for thread bobbins—to mend Petticoats and stockings and embroider handkerchiefs and sleeves. Other personal items suggest the occupational hazards of prostitution. Two glass urinals, designed respectively for women and men, were probably used when venereal disease confined a prostitute to bed.

Business was apparently good on Baxter Street, if 37 chamber pots are any indication of the number needed in one night. Charles Dickens may have required an escort to enter the Five Points, but other men were less intimidated. It is not unlikely that the brothel catered to the politicians who worked just two blocks away at City Hall. It would have been easy to combine a visit to a Baxter Street tailor with one to a favorite prostitute. Perhaps the brothel’s ceramics, decorated with scenes of war and patriotism—Commodore McDowell’s 1814 victory on Lake Champlain during the War of 1812, Lafayette commemorating the tomb of Benjamin Franklin, and the inscription, “E Pluribus Unum”—appealed to clients’ sense of civic pride. Along with finches in their cages (several glass bird feeders were recovered), the genteel decor would have made middle-class men feel right at home. —R.Y.
By the mid-nineteenth century, clay pipes had become an insignia of the working class, the better-off having given them up for pipes made of wood or meerschaum. The clay pipes found at the homes of Eastern European immigrants at 22 Baxter Street are distinct from those found at the Irish site on Pearl Street. Twenty percent of the more than 150 pipes from Baxter Street depict American patriotic motifs, the most common of which are the federal eagle and 13 stars. The context in which they were found was filled ca. 1860, when the property was occupied by a working-class tenement, the second by Lambert Blower, a Dutch tailor; and the third by Samuel Luber, a German tailor. Paul Reckner, JMA’s pipe analyst, thinks the patriotic motifs may reflect participation in early trade unions. According to labor historian Sean Wiliner, New York’s German tailors were well organized and radical, playing a key role in strikes and protests in 1850. While factory owners felt unions were the enemies of democracy, organized labor used patriotic symbols to proclaim their rights as members of the working class and committed members of the American republic. No documents tying the residents of 22 Baxter Street to trade unions have been found, but the motifs on the pipes suggest that the men expressed patriotism in areas where public drinking and smoking were going on. In contrast, only a handful of the 276 pipes recovered from the caisson at the Irish tenement had patriotic symbols. The influx of Irish workers, and thus changing labor laws, renewed civic debates over immigration and the moral standing of immigrants, especially those who were Roman Catholic. The attachment of anti-Irish rhetoric to pipes may have prompted the Irish to avoid such motifs entirely.

Immigrant workers were able to afford meat as a regular part of their diets, sometimes with each of their three daily meals. Analysis of the dental remains, conducted by New York University zoosarchaeologist Pam Crabtree and Claudia Milne of JMA, has revealed ethnic differences in food choices and cooking styles. More than half of the bones recovered from the German tenement of 22 Baxter Street were from sheep, suggesting that lamb or mutton was their preferred food. This choice does not reflect any known German dietary tradition. Mutton and lamb, which were more expensive than beef and pork, were not widely eaten by other immigrant groups in the neighborhood. Most of the bones from the caisson associated with the Irish tenement at 472 Pearl Street were from pigs. Pork was the least expensive meat, and evidence of on-site butchering suggests that residents were raising pigs in the small lot behind the tenement, further lowering the cost. They also ate pig’s feet, probably cooked in wine and spices in a traditional choucroute, served at the harvest in the old country. In the 1890s, 8 Baxter Street was occupied by five families of Italian immigrants. More than half the food remains from their privies were from fish and clams, the least expensive foods in nineteenth-century New York, yet also part of a traditional rural Italian diet.

From the archaeological perspective, Five Points looks different from the myth that has endured in the annals of New York history. There were brothels and saloons on the block where the courthouse now stands, but there were also many immigrants attempting to lead respectable lives in a strange new city. A doctoral dissertation written in the early 1970s by historian Carol Groneman, now at John Jay College, also noted the discrepancy between the contemporary accounts of working-class life in the Sixth Ward, including Five Points, and the primary documentary record. Her study of the 1855 New York State household census showed immigrant residents of the Sixth Ward had strong kinship ties and worked together to survive economic and living conditions that were largely beyond their control. The image of Five Points as a notorious slum reflected a common attitude to working-class neighborhoods that were the product of the Industrial Revolution. According to Australian historian Alan Mayne, working-class districts throughout the English-speaking world were described using the same list of negative terms. Dickens’ words are typical:

"This is the place, these narrow ways, desiring to the right and left, and nothing anywhere with diet and drink. Nowhere, bear the same fruits here as elsewhere. The course and bloomed faces at the doors have counterparts at home, and all the wide world over. Debauchery has made the very houses prematurely old. See how the distant bounds are lost beyond, how the patched and broken windows seem to reveal dimly, like eyes that have been hurt in drunken frenzies."

This approach uses the rhetoric of middle-class values to homogenize ethnic variation and working-class style, masking the reality of working-class life in the overcrowded districts of the inner city. Dickens’ descriptions of Five Points are classic, but the same words and images were used to describe the Rocks in Sydney, Australia, the back slums of Birmingham, England, and Chinatown in San Francisco.

The archaeology of domestic trash is no equal for dramatic tales of thieves, prostitutes, and gang wars. The physical remains, however, speak of a determination to maintain respectability no matter how difficult the circumstances, to carry on ethnic traditions in the face of vicious stereotyping, and to endure abysmal sanitary conditions. The Irish on Pearl Street continued to fill their humble homes with pretty things, while using every conceivable means—scavenging rags, profiting fruit, taking in boarders—to make ends meet. They maintained traditions that had been important in Ireland and raised their children with values that would help them succeed in America. The German and Polish Jews on Baxter Street worked as factory units in the clothing industry.

They appear to have been less interested in consumer goods than the Irish, using their resources instead to employ help, maintain their businesses, and eventually buy property. They, too, brought Old World customs to New York, but they also participated in the labor movement, which bridged ethnic boundaries in the struggle for workers’ rights.

The diversity within the one block we studied is enough to question the uniform image of Five Points as a “nest of vipers,” a phrase often used by nineteenth-century journalists. Five Points was a working-class neighborhood where newly arrived immigrants and native-born workers struggled to find their way. Unable to afford property, they expressed themselves through the consumer goods that were readily available in the marketplace. As archaeological data, these goods provide intriguing new insights into the working-class life of old New York.

REBECCA YAMIN is a principal archaeologist/senior project manager for John Milner Associates of Philadelphia.