

The Communal Legitimacy of Collective Violence: Community and Politics in
Antebellum New York City Irish Gang Subculture

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines the influences that New York City's Irish-Americans had on the violence, politics, and underground subcultures of the antebellum era. During the Great Famine era of the Irish Diaspora, Irish-Americans in Five Points, New York City, formed strong community bonds, traditions, and a spirit of resistance as an amalgamation of rural Irish and urban American influences. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Irish immigrants and their descendants combined community traditions with concepts of American individualism and upward mobility to become an important part of the antebellum era's "Shirtless Democracy" movement. The proto-gang political clubs formed during this era became so powerful that by the late 1850s, clashes with Know Nothing and Republican forces, particularly over New York's Police force, resulted in extreme outbursts of violence in June and July, 1857. By tracking the Five Points Irish from famine to riot, this thesis as whole illuminates how communal violence and the riots of 1857 may be understood, moralised, and even legitimised given the community and culture unique to Five Points in the antebellum era.

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Introduction

“The sea of politics, like the physical ocean, has its surface-tide and undertow. The great masses of the people never swim upon the former below the depth of a common wave – they read their papers, and hold their discussions, and have their angry differences at times, but all unconscious of the doings of politicians, and the ugly shapes and dark deeds which exist in the secret depths.”

- “The Political Undertow,” *New York Times* Oct 28 1856

My thesis analyses Irish immigration and gang culture in 1840s and 1850s New York City, with a focus on the political uses of collective violence by the Irish community. The examination analyses what conditions, when prevalent, led to riots. Rather than focus on the riots themselves, however, this thesis delves into how the context of lower Manhattan's antebellum subcultures justified collective violence and rough justice as communally acceptable and politically prudent. The famine generation of Irish immigrants to New York City created political groups prone to extralegal violence. How this subculture formed and how it fared over time make up the details of this thesis.

My survey of the literature on American violence and traditions of resistance revealed frequent examples of understandable collective violence. For instance, Iver Bernstein's *New York Draft Riots* illustrates the cause and effect between the cultural and financial divides in 1860s New York, divergent attitudes towards the Civil War, and an elitist draft process as grounds for the largest and deadliest riot in New York City's history.¹ The blossoming historiography on collective violence since the 1960s, first led by Richard Hofstadter and Richard Maxwell Brown, moved away from century-old moralist or sensationalist constructions of violent episodes to understand how directed violence combined with communal support could be a practical political tool.² Without such works creating a precedent and methodology for the academic study of violence and ordering, the following chapters would not be possible.³

¹ Iver Bernstein, *The New York City Draft Riots: Their Significance for American Society and Politics in the Age of the Civil War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 3-14.

² For groundbreaking studies on American violence, see Richard Maxwell Brown, *Strain of Violence: Historiographical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace, *American Violence: A Documentary History* (New York: Knopf, 1970); Micheal Feldberg, *The Turbulent Era: Riot and Disorder in Jacksonian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Gurr, *The History of Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (New York: Praeger, 1969).

³ For important works on American rioting, see Brown, *Strain of Violence*; David Grimsted, *American Mobbing, 1828-1861: Toward Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Michael Feldberg, *The Turbulent Era: Riot and Disorder in Jacksonian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Paul A. Gilje, *Rioting in*

The thesis draws from both primary and secondary source material. On a research trip to New York City and Washington in August of 2012, I collected antebellum newspaper records including the iconic *New York (Daily) Times*, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* and the *New York Tribune*, among others.⁴ The New York Public Library's microfilms of *The Irish-American* and *New York Herald* provided me with key insights into New York's Irish-American community, and the Municipal Archives in City Hall offered access to New York County's indictment records and contemporary Board of Alderman documents.⁵ The Library of Congress collections in Washington helped bring my attention to a number of diaries and biographies: notably the diary of George Templeton Strong, the writings of Henry David Thoreau, and the election biographies of Fernando Wood.⁶ For secondary sources, I am most indebted to Tyler Anbinder's *Five Points* both for its depth of research and ability to capture Sixth Ward culture, to Peter Adams' *Bowery Boys*, which sorts fact from fiction in the gangs of New York, and finally Jerome Mushkat's *Fernando Wood*, for chronicling New York City's complicated machine politics.⁷

America (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1996). For important works on the formation of the modern police, covered in chapter 3, see Roger Lane, *Policing the City: Boston, 1822-1885* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967); Wilbur R. Miller, *Cops and Bobbies: Police Authority in New York and London, 1830-1870* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977); James F. Richardson, *The New York Police: Colonial Times to 1901* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970). For works exploring New York City's extralegal antebellum subcultures, see Herbert Asbury, *The Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1928); Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (London: Harvard University Press, 1988); Mary P. Ryan, *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 135-180.

⁴ The paper's original 1851 name was the *New York Daily Times*, but changed to its current name in mid-1857.

⁵ *New York County District Attorney Indictment Records; Documents of the Board of Aldermen of the City of New York; Proceedings and Documents of the Board of Assistant Alderman of the City of New York*, New York Municipal Archives, New York City, NY.

⁶ George Templeton Strong, *The Diary of George Templeton Strong* (New York, Macmillan, 1852); Xavier Donald MacLeod, *Biography of Hon. Fernando Wood, Mayor of the City of New York* (New York: O.F. Parsons, 1856); Abijah Ingraham, *A Biography of Fernando Wood: A History of the Forgeries, Perjuries and Other Crimes of our "Model" Mayor* (New York: 1856).

⁷ 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); Peter Adams, *The Bowery Boys: Street Corner Radicals and the Politics of Rebellion* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005); Jerome Mushkat, *Fernando Wood: A Political Biography* (Kent, OH: Kent State University, 1990).

Despite the wealth of publications tracing the intersections of politics, culture, and violence in America's long history, numerous episodes of collective violence remain underrepresented historiographically. One of those gaps lies in antebellum urban violence. My research inquiries, localised to the antebellum era, sought to explain the conditions behind lower Manhattan collective violence in the summer of 1857. Specifically, the long term origins of two events take precedence: the June 16th New York Police Riot, and the Bowery Boys Riot of July 4th and 5th, 1857.

The thesis is structured into three chapters. Chapter One examines the transplanted Irish community that gained a foothold in lower Manhattan. Understanding the belligerents of the 1857 riots requires understanding the community values, traditions, and circumstances of lower Manhattan neighbourhoods, specifically the heavily Irish-American Five Points district where most of the rioters lived, worked, and died. Tracing the origins of famine-generation Irish immigration into Five Points and understanding their tight-knit, parochial community, lays the basis for later acts of collective violence by the New York Irish. Early historiography on antebellum violence disregarded the American Irish as ignorant, helplessly destitute, and naturally immoral; a group symbolising “an insurrection of evil against law; an uprising of suppressed hellish forces against order.”⁸ The opening chapter of this thesis breaks these myths about the Five Points Irish, and situates the community in its proper context.

Chapter Two considers the rise of New York City's gangs, one of the radical political organisations of their era.⁹ Irish-American gangs were built from the famine generation's cultural

⁸ Stoddard was writing his memoirs of New York's Draft Riot twenty years after the events. His narrative was, like many others of the era, impassioned, morally righteous, and error-filled. William Osborne Stoddard, *The Volcano Under the City, By a Volunteer Special* (New York: Fords, Howard and Hulbert, 1887), 9-10.

⁹ For the purposes of this thesis, the term “radical” refers to New York City's populist extra-legal movements which affiliated with the Democratic or Know Nothing parties. Marxist radicals did exist in New York City in this era, but will neither be mentioned nor alluded to in this text.

foundation in lower Manhattan, and entered American politics to increase their financial and political independence. For the New York Irish, born and raised in traditions of resistance and rowdiness, growth meant embracing urban antebellum America's "Shirtless Democracy" politics, an ideology which encouraged corruption, extra-legal action, and directed acts of mob violence for political gain. I show how through the use of popular disorder, the newly formed, highly political, populist New York radicals entered American politics and thrived. New York City's infamous "bloody Auld" Sixth Ward in fact became one of the most important and powerful political districts in America by mid-century due to strong community roots, flexible adherence to the law, and sheer audacious force of will.

Chapter Three traces the collision between the cultural and political traditions of Five Points with legal shifts, driven by New York Mayor Fernando Wood on one hand, and by the Republican controlled State Legislature in Albany on the other. I examine the riots caused by the 1857 Police crisis, in which State Republicans replaced the partisan Democratic New York Police Department with the Metropolitan Police Act. After growing too powerful and too chaotic, New York's entire system of governance was broken by forces too large for even the gangs to repel. Though the transition did not come without a fight, the New York Police and Bowery Boys Riots represented the final stand for a dying political subculture, forcibly removed from roles they had forcibly obtained.

Several main tenets weave their way through all three chapters of the thesis. For one, lower Manhattan's urban community was in a constant state of dynamic change. At first, the Sixth and surrounding Wards were populated almost overnight by an entirely new foreign culture, as thousands of Irish fled from famine to New York City annually. After a period of establishment, New York City's Irish-Americans sought upward mobility and political power,

and achieved their ends by embracing chaotic and opportunistic political bands. Finally, by the middle of the 1850s the gang subculture in New York was subjugated by larger forces, first willingly by New York City's mayor, and then forcibly, by the Republican Party. As a result, by late 1857 the B'hoy figure, a male politically active rowdy who answered only to his community, scarcely had reason to exist at all.

Secondly, the Irish-American community never faltered from their two defining traits – duty to the community and steeped traditions of resistance against adversarial higher authority. These qualities represented Five Points' greatest strength and weakness. In difficult times, the Irish-American community banded together to ensure the neighbourhood would endure, survive, and even prosper. Whenever the Irish found their economic or cultural opportunities stunted by harsh conditions, nativism, competing factions, or the government, violent and brutal resistance was the community's natural and inevitable response. Yet during the Police Crisis, this insular worldview reached its limitations. From 1855 to 1857, short term thinking and intra-faction violence served to only accelerate the subculture's destruction.

Third, New York City's constant state of flux inevitably clashed with the lower Manhattan Irish community's unwavering worldviews. New York City radicals excelled for years until changes by the municipal and state governments transformed the urban order. Only profound reforms installing a firm structure of urban ordering could disrupt and destabilise New York City's gang subculture, which had excelled in an environment of freedom and independence. First, Mayor Fernando Wood convinced gang leaders to trade away both for steady patronage posts in 1855-1856. Next, when New York City proved incapable of making the required gains in public safety and reducing street level corruption, Albany enforced the necessary steps forward. The legal changes created a city structure and city services still

recognisable to this day, but led to immediate rioting and even more institutionalised corruption through the Civil War and Reconstruction Eras.

In summation, the three chapters of this thesis explore the roots, rise, and fall of the unique and fleeting subculture of Irish political radicals in antebellum New York City. By examining the values of groups like the Bowery Boys, New York's most famous radical political band, lower Manhattan's penchant for collective violence in the antebellum era is shown to be natural and expected within the neighbourhood's sub-cultural constructs. Further, New York's peaking violence during the 1857 Police Crisis is viewed as the unavoidable clash between a "modernising" New York government and the "traditional" views of the Irish community. New York City's Irish-American underground subculture is therefore an ideal case study for the intersections between community, politics, and violence which defined the antebellum era.

Chapter One

Trans-Atlantic Traditions of Resistance: The Old World Values of the New York Irish

In the early hours of the morning on the 17th of March, 1859, Mike Walsh began his inebriated walk home to 208 West 21st Street, New York City. A man then past his prime, a drunken evening followed by a stagger home was becoming a common occurrence for Walsh. On this particular evening, the former United State Congressman and proud Irishman had been meeting with his old associates of the Spartan Foundation for St. Patrick's Day celebrations. The evening at a local tavern likely involved plenty of spirits and sharing old stories from rowdy times past.¹⁰

Walsh was not always such a sad figure. The Spartan Foundation, led by the staunchly Democratic Walsh, was a notorious, politically aggressive wing of the Bowery Boys gang in the 1840s. The Bowery Boys were an inner New York City group of political radicals, focused on personal and community advancement by any means necessary. Walsh led the Spartans at their zenith, rallying the growing metropolis' working class to fight for their rights and opportunities.¹¹ As the urban proletariat became a force to be reckoned with, gang culture lionised disparate community leaders into heroes. New York's political machine, Tammany Hall, and even ruling government parties nationwide, were forced to take note that neglecting the lower classes carried significant risks.

This chapter explains the origin of men like Mike Walsh. It examines how impoverished Irish immigrants arrived in New York City, faced adversity, and banded together as communities to gain stability and opportunity. The brutal conditions faced by immigrants in both Ireland and New York gave early Irish-Americans an inward-looking and tragic worldview, but simultaneously helped coalesce their new community in Five Points. The cultural community in

¹⁰ Peter Adams, *The Bowery Boys: Street Corner Radicals and the Politics of Rebellion* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005), 129-130.

¹¹ The culture and characteristics of groups like the Bowery Boys will be detailed in Chapter 2 of this thesis. Ibid, xv-xxi.

Five Points was heavily built on the physical structures of the neighbourhood – the tenements, saloons, churches, and squares. As meeting halls, these areas represented the leading edge of upward mobility for the Irish in the antebellum United States. In Chapter 2, we will see that many of the activities motivated by Five Points' search for prosperity were not, strictly speaking, legal. In fact, an entire underworld network grew out of the conditions and community of Five Points. This chapter examines the community foundations of New York City's antebellum gangs, explicitly political organisations which thrived when bolstered by the chaos of swelling immigration, Democratic factionalism, and corruption. I argue that the famine generation of Irish immigrants and their transplanted community-first values were instrumental to the rise of New York's gangs.

Therefore, this is a context-setting chapter. It describes antebellum New York City and the areas in which the Irish immigrants settled from the years 1845-1855. Special attention is paid to the social, cultural and political environment of Five Points and the Bowery which were part of New York City's Sixth Ward. Antebellum Irish-Americans used traditions of community resistance imported from Ireland, combined with community affiliations and alliances formed in New York to resist anti-immigrant forces and acquire an economic and political foothold in the city. The Irish Diaspora into antebellum New York City changed the metropolis significantly. Rural Irish culture, when transplanted into urban Manhattan, survived and eventually thrived.

Circumstances in Ireland Encouraging Immigration and Resistance

Understanding antebellum Irish-American culture in New York City begins with understanding the first great wave of Irish immigration. Early historians took a parochial and negative view of the so-called "lost generation" of Irish who arrived in the decades before the

Civil War.¹² Yet, in the 1950s, two works shifted the focus of Irish immigrant history and took a realistic view of the plight of the Irish immigrants. Oscar Handlin's *The Uprooted*, written as a narrative literary history, first connected to the Irish on a human level.¹³ Although it focused on the turn-of-the-century immigrants, it connected with academics to inspire a rich historiography of the Irish in America, beginning with *Ireland and the American Emigration* by Arnold Schrier in 1958.¹⁴ Cultural studies from the past several decades further reveal how most antebellum Irish in fact improved their circumstances substantially, particularly in comparison to the dire situation of the Irish famine.¹⁵

The statistics on Irish immigration to the antebellum United States in general and New York in particular are staggering. The vast majority of today's forty million Irish-Americans can trace their ancestry to the famine Diaspora. Over the first half of the nineteenth century, the United States consul in Dublin noted, "the principle freight from Ireland to the United States consists of passengers."¹⁶ About 700,000 Irish arrived in America from 1820 to 1840, averaging about 35,000 per annum. This annual average exploded during the famine; more people left Ireland in eleven years than in the prior two and a half centuries. The Great Famine lasted from

¹² Contemporary anti-Irish rhetoric from nineteenth century papers and historians will be cited later in this chapter when discussing Nativism, and extensively during the second chapter. For works detailing the early myths about Irish immigration in contrast to the actual upward Irish mobility, see Andrew M. Greeley, *The Irish Americans: The Rise to Money and Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), or his earlier publication, *The Most Distressful Nation: The Taming of the American Irish* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1972).

¹³ Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2002 [1951]).

¹⁴ Schrier's labour history was groundbreaking in the sense that it was the first to focus on a single group of people instead of the Marxist narrative. It was also the first to describe the Irish antebellum generation as a success story rather than a failure. As such it is still cited frequently to this day as the intellectual origin of Irish cultural studies. Arnold Schrier, *Ireland and the American Emigration, 1850-1900* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1958).

¹⁵ Examples from Anbinder, *Five Points*, Chapters 1-3, will gain considerable attention in this chapter. See also, Stephan A Brighton, *Historical Archaeology of the Irish Diaspora: The Transnational Approach* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee, 2009); Mary C. Kelly, *The Shamrock and the Lily: The New York Irish and the Creation of a Transatlantic Identity, 1845-1921* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005); David Noel Doyle, "The Remaking of Irish-America, 1845-1880," in *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States*, eds. J.J. Lee and Marion R. Casey, (New York: New York University, 2006), 171-212.

¹⁶ Edward Wakin, *Enter the Irish-American* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976), 7.

1845 to 1855, and Ireland's population dropped from roughly eight and one-half million, to five and one-half million during this time. Deaths accounted for over one million of the population decrease, and over one and three quarter million emigrated away in the decade before the American Civil War, peaking at 216,000 in 1851.¹⁷ America's immigration rate during the 1850s remains historically the nation's highest per capita at fifteen immigrants per thousands of the American populace.¹⁸

Over the long term, antebellum Irish immigration to New York City was motivated by numerous push and pull factors. For starters, rural Ireland in the first half of the nineteenth century was a difficult place to live. The parish of Kenmare in county Kerry for instance, was described by visitors as "wretched," "miserable" and "filthy," terms likewise oft utilised to describe Five Points in Manhattan. Yet these descriptors were applied to the county even before the Great Potato Famine began to ravage Ireland in 1845.¹⁹ The Irish had endured hardship for centuries already. The so-called "seven hundred years of enslavement" began with incursions into eastern Ireland by Henry II in 1169. It lasted through a religious war began by Henry VIII over resistance to his 1536 break with the Catholic Church, through centuries of colonization, the massacres of Cromwell, and even through one hundred and twenty-five years under the draconian Penal Code of 1691 which made the Irish beggars without rights on their own land.²⁰

Elements of the Irish identity still visible today were forged during these trials and tribulations. Aspects of Catholic doctrine like the existence of evil and original sin were present

¹⁷ As with any event involving figures in the millions of individuals, the figures vary slightly by source. The numbers given slant towards historians who provided more detailed population counts, but still should be regarded as a rough average between different sources. William V. Shannon, *The American Irish* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 28; T.J. English, *Paddy Whacked: The Untold Story of the Irish American Gangster* (New York: ReganBooks, 2005), 3, 5. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 291.

¹⁸ Joseph P. Ferrie, *Yankeys Now: Immigrants in the Antebellum United States, 1840-1860* (New York: Oxford, 1999), 189.

¹⁹ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 38.

²⁰ Shannon, *American Irish*, 4-7.

in their daily lives. Irishmen could not legally speak their own language or worship their religion, vote, sit on a jury, bear arms or serve in the armed forces, teach or gain a higher education. In a culture where despair was expected, the community took a greater role. Rough sport, heavy consumption of the illegal home-stilled grain whiskey *poitín*, and brawling between factions helped vent frustration. Storytelling, oratory, poetry and song were cherished due to high illiteracy rates, challenging a people who have, somewhat counter-intuitively, produced some of the world's foremost writers. This community joined tightly together, believing that they must endure in the face of failures, aggressively conserve what they felt to be theirs, and hold together the values of their community.²¹

No matter how well the community banded together, conditions for small farmers and labourers were atrocious by the second and third decades of the nineteenth century. The British Parliament in 1836 acquired testimonials across Ireland to determine the levels of poverty in preparation for amending the British "Poor Laws." A protestant minister from Palmerston told the committee that average unskilled labourers in the county could only find jobs for three months out of each year. Unemployment figures in county Kerry were similar. The regions were suffering from overpopulation, a lack of affordable land, and a lack of economic development.²² Rent was often paid in labour or through the sale of more expensive crops such as wheat or oats reserved specifically for those means, leaving only potatoes for family consumption. It is not an exaggeration to say that, aside from some meat on Christmas and Easter, the potato was the only food consumed daily, with some salt for taste. One North Sligo labourer states that he, his wife,

²¹ Literacy rates improved substantially in the America, even among the lower classes. Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University, 1985), 34; Shannon, *American Irish*, 8-9; John W. Hurley, *Shillelagh: The Irish Fighting Stick* (Pipersville, PA: Caravat, 2007), 190-191, 247, 286.

²² Anbinder, *Five Points*, 50.

and four children consumed two and a half stone, or thirty-five pounds, of potatoes each day.²³

Living conditions were similarly desperate. According to one resident's 1836 Poor Inquiry testimony, cabins in North Sligo and Lansdowne were no more than 21 feet by 13 feet in length and width, with uneven soil flooring and mud walls, roofed with branches, straw and sod, and having only straw or a single unclean quilt for bedding between an entire family. Kenmare archdeacon John O'Sullivan described the Lansdowne tenants in 1844 as "the most wretched people upon the face of the globe."²⁴

Political conditions created a state of privation which had already begun pushing the Irish to emigrate before the potato blight struck. Ireland's circumstances were different from the rest of Europe. English hegemony left the Irish rural economy unable to modernise, and the country massively overpopulated. The land was under the control of middlemen seeking short term gains who by the 1840s had subdivided half the land into plots of only about five acres. These plots were below the necessary size from which farmers could maintain a steady and sufficient income.²⁵

The famine, however, was different from prior burdens. The famine was worse. As established, Irish farms could only profitably produce and export one product between a lack of capital and the strict Corn Laws installed by the British.²⁶ When the potato crops were almost completely ruined by fungus in 1845, suffering was relatively mild. But when the crops failed entirely the next two years and there was no alternative foodstuff, mass starvation ensued. A Lansdowne relief official in February 1847 charged with finding work for men and women

²³ Ibid, 52.

²⁴ Ibid, 53-54; *Sun*, May 27th, 29th, 1834.

²⁵ John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1985), 28.

²⁶ English, *Paddy Whacked*, 4.

delirious with fever, paled by dropsy, and suffering from dysentery, admitted, “I see nothing within the bounds of possibility that can save the people.”²⁷

Some families starved in their own farm houses, or begged for food on the town streets and outside churches. Tales spread of horrific conditions. Bodies were found on the streets by the handful each morning. A witness named O’Sullivan in early 1847 wrote:

The cries of starving hundreds that besiege me from morning to night actually ring in my ears...I attended myself a poor woman whose infant, dead two days, lay at the foot of the bed, and four others nearly dead in the same bed...A famished cat got up on the corpse of the poor infant and was about to gnaw at it but for my interference.²⁸

Starvation was actually a less common and more merciful way to die compared to other famine-related diseases. Sore mouth came from the poor quality of food eaten in desperation, as did limbs swollen from infection. Dysentery was a common and excruciating death. The fungus-coated food would eat away at an individual’s stomach and intestinal lining, until even passing wholesome food would pull away living membrane of the intestine through the bowels in a bloody discharge.²⁹

The British Secretary of the Treasury in London, Charles Trevelyan, certainly heard and read these reports, and in fact was the recipient of the letter quoted in part above, but he was less than sympathetic. He publicly commented that “Ireland’s greatest evil” was not the famine, but instead “the selfish, perverse, and turbulent character of the people.”³⁰ Trevelyan almost singlehandedly controlled relief expenditure, and so the minimal British relief efforts would not slow the rate of Irish death and disease. In fact, the emergency was officially declared at an end in 1848 when the fungus subsided for the first time, despite residents being by then too destitute

²⁷ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 55.

²⁸ English, *Paddy Whacked*, 4.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

to afford seed crops, too weak to plant, and the fungus immediately re-appearing again in 1849.³¹ The reason so many Irish abandoned their homeland is therefore quite simple. Forces outside of Irish control made clear that self-imposed exile was often the only alternative for any who wished to live. Some fled to Liverpool, and others to Australia or Canada, but most sought refuge in the United States. On a basic level, they sought hope – hope for a better life which did not exist in Ireland.³²

Finding passage could nevertheless be a challenge for the impoverished and starving rural Irish. The trip would cost over a month's foodstuffs, a ship ticket, and required warm clothing. Many Irish wished to emigrate but required financial assistance, either from their local landowning parish noblemen or via remittances from already emigrated relatives. Landlord aid was variable by region and could hardly be relied upon in a timely fashion, if at all. In one of the poorest and hardest hit areas, for example, Lansdowne estate in Kenmare, county Kerry, the marquis did not begin financing emigration until December of 1850. Though too late for many it was still warmly welcomed, for only six percent of all Irish immigrants received such assistance.³³

The decision to fund passage appears to actually have been more an economic calculation than a humanitarian one. In 1847 the new famine relief program dictated that landlords would shoulder the lion's share of relief costs moving forward. As a result Lord Palmerston's estate

³¹ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 39.

³² This thesis simplifies the complicated story of the Irish Diaspora to the basic elements causing mass immigration to America in general and New York City in particular. For a more detailed cultural and political history of the Diaspora covering British discrimination, the death of Irish political leader Daniel O'Connell, and numerous failed uprisings, see Robert E. Kennedy Jr., *The Irish: Emigration, Marriage, and Fertility* (Berkeley: University of California, 1973).

³³ Gore Booth is a notable example from the other side of the spectrum to Lord Palmerston. He compensated for the minimal government assistance on his Drumcliff estate by importing and selling bread and corn to his tenants below cost, set up free soup kitchens, provided as many employment opportunities as he could under the public works program, and even mortgaged the estate itself to finance these charitable acts. His actions mitigated, but did not prevent, starvation in Drumcliff. Anbinder, *Five Points*, 39, 49, 57.

agent Joseph Kincaid in Ahamlish, North Sligo, first ran the numbers of the landlord taxes against funding passage for all those willing to give up their leases over the next two years. He reported that Palmerston would not only recoup his emigration losses with a lesser poor taxes, but rid himself of the “dead weights” too poor and weak to farm the land with a “better class of tenants.”³⁴ Palmerston had funded passage for two thousands souls by the end of the year. The more humanitarian, but by then financially strained, Gore Booth followed suit by sponsoring passage for fifteen hundred Drumcliff residents as well.³⁵ Though most immigrants ended up joining the Irish community in the United States and hundreds in Five Points specifically, both landlords chose Canada as the ships’ destination due to a slight cost advantage and to avoid accusations of depopulating the Empire.³⁶ By the time county Kerry began exporting its own paupers, choosing a patriotic location no longer seems to have been a priority. About 4,600 people in total were transported from the Lansdowne estate to New York via Liverpool. The marquis’ estate agent, Mr. Trenchm, equated the cost of travel to 3 pounds 10 shillings a head, while the cost of tending to an Irish pauper was 4 pounds 11 shillings each year.³⁷

Finally, the journey across the Atlantic was a test of survival in and of itself. The maiden voyage funded by Lord Palmerston actually sunk during crossing, a reminder of the inherent risks ocean passage involved. The mortality rate for all vessels in 1847 was fifteen percent, mostly due to outbreaks of contagious diseases like typhus.³⁸ Earlier Irish immigrants fared better than those in the famine’s later years since increased desperation meant many attempted the journey with no food or proper clothing to supplement the ship’s minimal food and water

³⁴ Both Lords selected, when they could, the weakest and least savoury individuals to send over, and later came under scrutiny from the House of Lords for such tactics. Anbinder, *Five Points*, 59-61.

³⁵ Ibid, 59.

³⁶ In contrast, Lord Lansdowne supplied almost no provisions for the Atlantic passage, but allowed immigrants to choose their destination. The vast majority choose New York. Anbinder, *Five Points*, 64.

³⁷ “Senior’s Irish Voyage,” *Dublin Review* 12 (January-April 1869), 6.

³⁸ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 60.

allowances. Though none of the Lansdowne vessels sunk, days after one, the *Montezuma*, had ended its thirty-nine day voyage, the *New York Tribune* reported a group of destitute and starving immigrants from the ship were found huddled on the streets.³⁹ They were immediately fed and later transported to immigration officials, but their condition speaks to Lord Lansdowne essentially exporting his problems to America with little regard for their humanity or ultimate survival. It is even probable, though it cannot be confirmed, that so many of the later famine immigrants from Lansdowne's estate arrived near death that a wing of a major New York City hospital was unofficially dubbed "the Lansdowne Ward." As described by an anonymous critic in the *Dublin Review*, it was "crowded by the emigrants from the Lansdowne estate, who left it commonly in their coffins."⁴⁰

The passage process, conjunctionally brutal along with famine conditions in Ireland, informed Irish worldviews and political beliefs. As they disembarked to New York City, the immigrants would never forget how their government abandoned them. The famine taught Irish-Americans a great tolerance for suffering, and a close-knit community was required for survival. New York City's Irish culture adopted a tragic worldview, excellent at self-satire and yet expectant of great misery. The destitution associated with Irish-Americans risked turning into self pity and depression, so humour was often used to alleviate and forget harsh realities. Nothing was as it seemed, and so nothing could be truly serious. Ultimately, this outlook probably hindered the upward mobility of New York City's first generation Irish, since it disguised a lack of confidence, provided escapism when direct action might have been better

³⁹ *New-York Daily Tribune*, March 19, 1851, 4.

⁴⁰ Historian Tyler Anbinder suggests this article's author was a famed journalist named John Francis Maguire, who has recently visited New York in research for his upcoming book *The Irish in America*, which took a very negative view of Irish prospects and their American status. A representative of the marquis denied the rumour, while others wrote letters to affirm it, and Anbinder himself feels the nickname is entirely plausible considering one particular hospital's proximity to a neighbourhood popular for Lansdowne settlers. "Irish Voyage," *Dublin Review*, 7; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 65.

served, and increased the visible “difference” between the Irish-American community and native-born WASPS.⁴¹

Irish-American Urbanisation in New York City

Near to mid-century, rates of Irish persistence, the rate at which immigrants remained in New York City once landed, came close to fifty percent, much higher than the national average. In general, those who stayed were either too impoverished to continue west, or held ties to part of the New York community via a previously arrived family member or close friend. The poor, community-orientated Irish embodied both of these characteristics. Roughly one-third of north-eastern urban labourers, an occupation filled with Irishmen, persisted from 1850 to 1860, compared to one quarter or less in other regions.⁴² As time went on and New York City’s Five Points became dominated by Irish immigrants, sections of entire city blocks could be almost solely populated by immigrants of a single Irish county. By 1850, twenty-six percent of New York City, or 133,000 out of 513,000, were native to Ireland. Once the second and third generations are also accounted for, the city was more than one-third Irish.⁴³

Due to such high rates of persistence, Irish-Americans were the first urbanised ethnic group in America, which was still a rural nation in the antebellum era. By 1850, 748,000 out of 962,000 Irish-Americans lived in cities of the northeast: 78 percent of the group’s total

⁴¹ The acceptance of hardship as part of Irish identity is somewhat tenuous between correlation and causation. However, the examples cited show incidents where the Irish were repeatedly unable of leaving their collectivist ways to adapt to modern individualism and enterprise. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 296-299, 303-304, 315-319, 325-328.

⁴² The draw of the big city for consistent year round employment played a major role here. Half of all rural labourers had moved to urban areas by 1860. Joseph P. Ferrie, “Up and Out or Down and Out? Immigrant Mobility in the Antebellum United States,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 26.1 (Summer 1995), 36, 39-41.

⁴³ Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore also saw sharp, if not quite as dramatic, increases. Ferrie, *Yankees Now*, 186; Shannon, *American Irish*, 28.

population as compared to 40 percent of all Americans.⁴⁴ Though the industrialising American Northeast was a far different experience for predominantly rural immigrants, the region offered stability and reduced risk compared to those who moved west. Many Irish were less than eager to try their hand at farming once again after experiencing the famine and the dozen crop failures in the generation preceding it. Farming the American west offered loneliness to a very social population, and breaking soil on the raw uncleared frontier was very different than farming highly cultivated Irish fields. They were not the only group to feel this way. Regionally, the Northeast held an eight percent persistence rate for immigrants found in both censuses, as compared to fifty percent for other regions.⁴⁵ For the newest generation of Irish urbanites, the city represented relief from a centuries old burden.

This concentration of the Irish-American population not only into New England and New York City, but within specific Manhattan neighbourhoods, can be accounted for in multiple ways. Each explanation has much to do with the nature of the communities in lower Manhattan's Five Points and Bowery districts. Though parts of an urban lifestyle, such as the noises, crowds and smells of tenement living, were a great torment for rural migrants and created somewhat of a culture shock, New York neighbourhoods like Five Points contained important cultural and communal familiarities. Even hardship itself in the wake of the famine was familiar. Disease, poverty, subjugation, and unemployment, all reinforced that suffering was to be expected and endured. This extreme fatalism stunted the ambitions of many first-generation Irish-Americans, yet was accepted almost as a part of Irish pride and identity. The American-Irish endured difficult circumstances like a badge of honour.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Doyle, "Remaking of Irish-America," 224-225.

⁴⁵ Ferrie, "Out and Up," 42.

⁴⁶ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 299.

Early and rapid Irish-American urbanisation secured the culture its original foothold in American cities on the leading edge of nationwide urbanisation. New York City led the charge as the only city with a population over 200,000 in 1830, a time when only ten percent of Americans lived in cities.⁴⁷ The foothold guaranteed a strong lasting presence for the Irish thanks to their high fertility rates, and by acting as a target location for incoming nationals, despite immigration diversification over the next century. Once Irish communities had been formed, letters and word of mouth encouraged family and friends to come settle as neighbours. More, stabilised Irish immigrants were expected to send money back home to finance the passage of those to come in a process called chain migration. Such tactics made one particular neighbourhood, Five Points in lower Manhattan, the most homogenously Irish in New York City.⁴⁸

Famous Five Points

Five Points had been a settling area for recent American immigrants and minorities since the 1830s. Built over a filled-in pond called the Collect, poor land quality and increased crowding into the area kept prices low and settlement high, while the cost of living only twenty blocks northbound on Broadway skyrocketed. Five Points was one of the first urban slums, and certainly the most globally notorious slum of its era. As early as the 1830s, Five Points was drawing considerable media attention, allotting the neighbourhood national influence outside the borders of Park Row, Centre Street, Canal Street and the Bowery. Settlers subletting into shacks, cellars, attics and storage areas also made it one of the world's most crowded neighbourhoods, at a 310.4 population density per acre.⁴⁹ The district was a place that the Irish could call their own,

⁴⁷ By the end of the century, thirty-eight cities had a population above 200,000, and 40 forty percent of Americans were urbanites. Shannon, *Irish American*, 28.

⁴⁸ Anbinder proves this homogeneity though a thorough study of housing records. Anbinder, *Five Points*, 42-44, 19.

⁴⁹ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 23, 75.

but many others took interest in Five Points as well. Reformers, missionaries, writers, radicals, and even tourists were drawn to view the extreme conditions in Five Points with their own eyes. Many turned what they saw into prose, making Five Points an unusual *cause célèbre* for a number of movements. By the middle of the 1840s Five Points was globally notorious, mostly thanks to a squalid old brewing house and a visit from a revered literary mind.

Charles Dickens, already a celebrity before the age of thirty, toured North America for five months in 1841. One might have expected the subsequent author of *Oliver Twist* to treat the poor of New York with compassion, the same way he vocally criticised British treatment of their own impoverished masses. Instead Dickens' *American Notes*, drawn from his experience in the United States, harshly criticised every aspect of American life.⁵⁰ Through this critical eye, Dickens brought the locally infamous Five Points to the rest of the world. His introduction to New York itself was hardly favourable:

The beautiful metropolis of America is by no means so clean a city as Boston, but many of its streets have the same characteristics; except that the houses are not quite so fresh-coloured, the sign-boards are not quite so gaudy, the gilded letters not quite so golden, the bricks not quite so red, the stone not quite so white, the blinds and area railings not quite so green, the knobs and plates upon the street doors not quite so bright and twinkling. There are many by-streets, almost as neutral in clean colours, and positive in dirty ones, as by-streets in London; and there is one quarter, commonly called the Five Points, which, in respect of filth and wretchedness, may be safely backed against Seven Dials, or any other part of famed St. Giles's.⁵¹

It was the direct description of Five Points, however, which really emphasised the city's most dreadful conditions:

Let us... plunge into the Five Points. But it is needful, first, that we take as our escort these two heads of the police...

⁵⁰ Dickens' resentment was rooted in the meagre sales compensation United States copyright laws allotted the author for his work. Anbinder, *Five Points*, 32-34.

⁵¹ Charles Dickens, *American Notes: For General Circulation* (New York: Harper, 1842), 32.

We have seen no beggars in the streets by night or day; but of other kinds of strollers, plenty. Poverty, wretchedness, and vice, are rife enough where we are going now...

This is the place: these narrow ways, diverging to the right and left, and reeking everywhere with dirt and filth. Such lives as are led here, bear the same fruits here as elsewhere... Debauchery has made the very houses prematurely old. See how the rotten beams are tumbling down, and how the patched and broken windows seem to scowl dimly, like eyes that have been hurt in drunken frays. Many of those [aforementioned “city scavenger”] pigs live here. Do they ever wonder why their masters walk upright in lieu of going on all-fours? and why they talk instead of grunting?

The author continues on to evocatively describe the wretched conditions of the neighbourhood’s streets and tenements, along with the Tomb’s prison, before closing with the line, “all that is loathsome, drooping, and decayed is here.”⁵²

The most notoriously dilapidated tenement, the “Old Brewery” was twice the size of any other Five Points structure in its day. As the name suggests, the building produced beer in the eighteenth century when the Collect Pond was still a fresh water supply. In 1837, the structure was shabbily converted into a four story tenement stretching over one hundred feet back from the street and encompassing both 59 and 61 Cross Street on the southwest corner of Paradise Square. The resulting windowless rooms and unlit labyrinthine hallways collected the absolute poorest Five Pointers into a single building. Poor conditions within drew significant and repulsed media attention from mainstream newspapers, sensationalist dailies and weeklies, authors, songwriters, and missionaries.⁵³ One particular source, Herbert Asbury’s *Gangs of New York* published in 1927, described the Old Brewery at its most forlorn:

Throughout the building the most frightful living conditions prevailed. Miscegenation was an accepted fact, incest was not uncommon, and there was much sexual promiscuity; the house swarmed with thieves, pickpockets, beggars, harlots, and degenerates of every type. Fights were of almost constant occurrence, and there was scarcely an hour of the day or night when drunken orgies were not in progress, through the flimsy, clapboarded

⁵² Ibid, 34-36.

⁵³ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 67-71.

walls could be heard the crashing thud of a brickbat or iron bar, the shrieks of the unhappy victims, the wailing of starving children, and the frenzied cries of men and women, and sometimes boys and girls, writhing in the anguish of delirium tremors. Murders were frequent; it has been estimated that for almost fifteen years the Old Brewery averaged a murder a night.⁵⁴

While the Old Brewery may have been the worst building in the worst area of New York, the Asbury account is at least partially exaggerated. Overcrowding was certainly common, and notations on the vices succumbed to and miseries endured by the destitute poor, who could afford shelter only in the Old Brewery, appear many times over in antebellum primary sources. The building however housed as many ministers and other respectable, if working class, citizens as criminals. The tales of incest also appear facetious, as no reports of this appear in missionary or reform accounts of building tours. Finally, aside from the years of major riots, New York City averaged less than a reported thirty murders a year while the Old Brewery was a tenement. While murders could certainly go unreported, the building's foul play toll certainly could not be in the thousands.⁵⁵

Dickens was one of many visitors to Five Points in this era, which became a sort of morbid and squalid international attraction. Davy Crockett, Abraham Lincoln, literary critic Nathaniel P. Willis, abolitionist Lydia Maria Child, and multitudes of the affluent and elite toured the neighbourhood under police escort, inventing the American concept of "slumming." The visitors strolled through the district taking note to express shock and disgust at the dilapidation, poverty, and vice. New York behaving at its most cynically capitalist used slumming to turn a profit. Policemen charged for the escorted tours, and writers were never hard

⁵⁴ Asbury also dubiously claims that human bones were found in the apartments themselves by police when the building was due for demolition, and describes the famous names for several paths and alleys in and around the building. The most famous are Murder's Row and the Den of Thieves. Asbury, *Gangs of New York*, 12-15.

⁵⁵ The building was bought by Five Points Mission, used as a charity building and church, and then at last torn down in 1852, opening up Paradise Square considerably. Anbinder, *Five Points*, 70-71.

pressed to find a scandal rag willing to publish the newest batch of depravities found in Five Points.⁵⁶

As with the Old Brewery, tales of Five Points depravity and crime were prone to exaggeration by contemporary moralist sources. Much of this was part of the blooming print entertainment culture. Put simply, extreme misery sold well ever since the biographies by Mason Weems in the Revolutionary Era. Religious missionaries hoping to emphasize the need for their cause overstated both the levels of vice they encountered and their cure-all successes. Every ‘respectable’ New York paper like the *Tribune* and *Evening Post* took their turn at writing a Five Points expose, and other literature revelled entirely in the miseries of lower Manhattan, such as the *Courier and Enquirer* or the *New York American*. Five Points fit perfectly into the sensationalist’s view of urban degradation, vice and extremism, just as media began to spread more easily both locally and globally.⁵⁷

Irish-American Community Economy

One of the most enduring traditional values for first-generation Irish-Americans was to establish a home, marry young and raise a family quickly. Establishing a family statistically ensured a high persistence rate, but also meant first-generation males were far more likely to take a brutal but readily available labour job to support their family. Their children, who had greater access to education and in turn, higher literacy rates, fostered different goals. But for the parents, as for their immigrant predecessors in the 1830s, the goals were simple: find an early and fertile marriage, treat the family as an economic unit, and search for steady financial support.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 2, 34.

⁵⁷ Mission charities would only assist those who would attend their schools or give up liquor, but seemed happy to write about the plights and vices of those they refused to help. Ibid, 254-255, 34-35.

⁵⁸ Ferrie, *Up and Out*, 36; Doyle, “Remaking of Irish America,” 237.

It is accurate to call Five Points and the Bowery America's first slums, but these areas lacked some of the stereotypical attributes of today's modern ghettos like chronic unemployment, broken families, or social disorganisation. In 1855 Five Points, unskilled workers constituted the majority of the labour force at 58 percent, but skilled manual workers accounted for another 34 percent. The Irish were the leading suppliers of not only New York City's construction, but were also its leading masons, bricklayers, stone cutters, blacksmiths, plumbers, coopers, glassworkers, brass and copper smiths, and for the women, dressmakers.⁵⁹ Ninety-one percent of all labour force increases in the 1850s were filled by immigrants, half of which were Irish. The common work week totalled sixty hours over six days, and adult workplace death rates were high enough to leave many children orphaned or "half orphaned." Most Irish were actually *over*-employed, working themselves to an early grave. The "Ould Sixth" Ward, home to Five Points and the Bowery, was the first of its kind; it represented the first central urban population neglected by a capitalist system which stressed individual freedom but was a century away from creating official social or economic safety nets.⁶⁰

Many Irish could not afford to move west from New England even if they wished to. Yet a city like New York accommodated the Irish "family economy," where each member regardless of gender financially contributed, far better than moving westward. San Francisco, for example, had one Irish female job opportunity for every twenty-five Irish male jobs in 1852. Even as late as 1880, the ratio was one in four. New York City in 1855, by contrast, had two women's jobs

⁵⁹ Wilentz argues the gradual end of artisanship came in the 1820s, but early industrialisation created and expanded many of the "skilled" jobs mentioned above, many of which would not diminish until the 20th century. The Irish who worked as craftsmen utilised skills which had been in short supply in rural Ireland but had great demand in an urban metropolis. This Irish craft presence cannot be attributed to any exceptional skilfulness of Irish workers, but more likely to the pure volume of immigration. Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University, 1984), 146-8, 364-389; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 448, 498; Doyle, "Remaking of Irish America," 236.

⁶⁰ A child losing one of their parents was such a common occurrence that the phrase 'half-orphaned' was actually used to describe the condition contemporarily. Doyle, "Remaking of Irish America," 238.

for every three of men's.⁶¹ For their part, Irish male labourers worked as the physical builders of cities and national infrastructure right across the United States. Regardless of gender, work hours were long, the tasks physical, and the pay comparatively poor. Still, the family economy found reliable work, and as the cities grew, so did the roles of the Irish within them.⁶²

From a different perspective, the Irish were far better off in New York than if they had not emigrated at all. In 1845 Ireland, the typical annual working class income was between 1 pound 10 shillings and 2 pounds 5 shillings in the fluctuations of a farming economy. This was the equivalent of \$8 to \$13 in American greenbacks. In America, labouring was brutal but offered unquestionably greater money and opportunity than in Ireland. In 1850 New York, a labourer would earn between 88 to 91 cents daily and a New England farmer 48 cents with board. Compare that to a Dublin builder earning 32 to 52 cents each day and a farmer without board hoping to take in 12.5 cents daily, but often less. Clothing, rent and fuel costs were about the same in both nations, and American provisions were only one third the cost of the same in Ireland. Finally, educational opportunities for children were far superior in urban New England to Ireland or the American frontier.⁶³

Tailoring, for instance, in the late antebellum era was often farmed out to home workers for long hours in their sweltering tenement apartments. Along with shoemakers and seamstresses, tailors were the lowest of trades, earning maybe \$1 per week, requiring a deposit to work. They numbered almost twenty thousand at midcentury, ninety-six percent of which were foreign born. By 1850, these workers were referred to as "sweaters" or "sweated labour," the

⁶¹ In general, the further west one travelled, the more unbalanced the ratio became. Ibid, 230.

⁶² Developing urban centres like Buffalo, Cleveland, Chicago and Omaha, riverboats, rail towns, gold fields and mining cities had significant Irish contingents. In the 1850s movement west occurred to San Francisco, Butte, and Denver. In all cities the Irish built the new urban infrastructure of sewers, streets, housing, and water stations. Shannon, *Irish American*, 28-29.

⁶³ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 50; Ferrie, *Yankeys Now*, 235.

parent term for today's sweat shops. Poor conditions could also inspire resistance for change. That same year the tailors formed one of New York's first unions, held a strike with general success, and rioted against a clothing dealer who refused to accept their newly increased rates. Not all trades were so fortunate over the decade. Only one in eight construction workers worked under a union, which fought almost exclusively for sickness and death benefits. Many other Irish men and women faced overt or subtle hiring discrimination. In newspaper employment advertisements, numerous job listings have been found which included the qualification "No Irish need apply."⁶⁴

Business opportunities were limited for the Irish due to a lack of capital and rising racism in mainstream American culture. Since entrepreneurship faced unrealistic odds, the vast majority of Irish occupied the urban economic interstices when they could, and laboured when they could not. The insular Irish community formed its own business support network, which particularly respected blacksmiths, saloonkeepers, grocers, butchers, the makers of commercial goods, and the learned few professionals able to become doctors and lawyers for the roles they played in the neighbourhood. This respect was vital, for it took not only finances and skill to succeed, but community approval. For Irish patronage of a professional or tradesman's practice, two requirements had to be met: the owner must live in the community, and must assist those most in need when called upon. Tragedies like death by disease or a workplace accident were common, and when they struck a co-worker or family member took up a collection for the family. Refusal to contribute violated community values and the resulting community boycott would in turn

⁶⁴ The use of "No Irish need apply" discrimination, though it existed, does appear to have been vastly overstated historically until just recently. Wanted ads could bear this qualification, but none of the large signs previously thought commonplace have ever been found. Furthermore, job exclusion could not have been too extensive given labour demand. Anbinder, *Five Points*, 117-120, 123, 128; Kevin Kenny, "Race, Violence and Anti-Irish Sentiment in the Nineteenth Century," in *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States*, edited by J.J. Lee and Marion R. Casey (New York: New York University, 2006), 371-372.

damage that business financially. Such internalised enforcement of commercial and family values were unusual and seen as backward by native-born WASPs who valued individualism and modestly increasing freedoms for women and children in lieu of a family economy.⁶⁵

When Irish-American finances and health are compared to immigrants from other nations, the Irish again fare poorly. In 1850, the average Irish-American had only thirty-five percent the wealth of the average British or German male immigrant. The British and Germans, both facing lesser discrimination and both likely buoyed by their nation's industrialising economic similarity to the United States, were far more likely to achieve positive (and in turn half as likely to suffer negative or neutral) occupational mobility than the Irish whose only background was in a farming economy.⁶⁶ Similarly, high Irish death rates persisted in Eastern cities, with causes directly related to hard physical labour and the typhus, typhoid, and dysentery that swept through Irish slum housing due to poor sanitation from 1846 to 1849. Abnormal mortality rates for the American Irish lasted until the 1920s. For the famine generation, statistics were prone to exaggeration, but likely at least 200,000 Irish died within three years of immigrating.⁶⁷

The Irish did ultimately improve their work status in New York from the 1850 to 1860 census due to several factors. Firstly, the desperation and opposition faced by the first-generation Irish of the 1830s and 1840s left little place to move but up. Secondly, the longer the Irish remained in America, the better they fared for themselves, at a rate of fifteen percent wealth increase per annum after arrival. Finally, political activism and direct action, to be discussed in detail later, came of age for the Irish during this decade. This growth even technically closed the wealth gap between other immigrant populations to statistically insignificant levels by 1860,

⁶⁵ Shannon, *American Irish*, 36-38.

⁶⁶ Ferrie, *Yankees Now*, 187-188; Ferrie, "Out and Up," 51-52.

⁶⁷ Doyle, "Remaking of Irish America," 231, 217.

although this is misleading since far more Irish were and remained unskilled labourers than any other immigrant group.⁶⁸ Labour and pecuniary improvements were clearly made during the decade, but the possibility for a Five Points Irish man, woman, or child to live, suffer, and die in squalor and destitution had hardly disappeared.

Careful and intense savings habits help explain the decreased wealth gap. Even groups who came to America with nothing, like the Five Points Lansdowne immigrants actually exhibited Herculean frugality. In contract to interpretations depicting the first generation of the immigrant poor as lost to the famine and swallowed by the city, access to Irish contemporary banking records show that an economic foothold was clearly established for a significant proportion of the community. Ninety percent of Lansdowne immigrants lived in squalid Five Points tenements and worked as unskilled labourers, yet about half of these families had opened accounts at the Emigrant Savings Bank by mid-1855.⁶⁹

The income in these accounts is surprising to say the least. Four accounts were opened by Lansdowne immigrants on July 2nd, 1853. All had arrived two years prior, penniless, yet the smallest opening deposit of the day was in the account of “washer” Barbara Sullivan at \$135. Sullivan lived at 33½ Baxter Street in an apartment with her six children, son-in-law, six boarders, and no male breadwinner, yet the deposit would be worth roughly \$2,200 today. The average opening deposit for all Lansdowne immigrants was \$102, though many began with only a few dollars just to close the account a few weeks later. The function of these accounts varied. Some used the bank as a safe place to store the family’s emergency fund, such as Bonane native Mary Flynn. Starting with \$45 in August of 1853, the account doubled within the year. Its

⁶⁸ Ferrie, *Yankeys Now*, 188-189.

⁶⁹ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 136-137; For the Irish as a lost generation, see Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 295-299, 326; Also Robert Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City: 1825-1863* (New York: Columbia, 1949); and for a contemporary perspective, John Francis Maguire, *The Irish in America* (New York: D. & J. Sadlier & Co., 1868).

balance was halved during the recession winters of 1855 and 1858, but Mary always recovered it back to \$90 within a year. Just over a quarter of Lansdowne accounts saw savings gains reaching over \$250, or \$4,000 today. Ellen Holland, another “washer,” had lost both her husband and eldest son leaving her a widow with two children. Despite this she never once withdrew her savings and by 1860 had a balance of \$201.20, equivalent to \$3,200 in modern day. Non-Lansdowne Five Pointers typically saved even more money.⁷⁰ It appears that Irish rural living had hardened Five Points immigrants into extreme frugality.

With the funds in the top twenty-five percent of accounts, one could afford to leave the ward for better housing conditions elsewhere, but the draw of the community kept many from leaving the dilapidated neighbourhood. Families paid low rent, housed as many lodgers as they could, stressed a tight community bond, and ideally every individual regardless of gender and age worked whenever they were able. Savings appear to have been intended for very specific means, as nest eggs, safety nets, and remittance funds. Once a savings goal was reached, many looked to improve their quality of life within the tenement. The staple potato was replaced with “good substantial food,” probably meaning meat, akin to being “fed everyday like on Christmas at home,” according to one Palmerston immigrant. Stoves, bits of carpeting, decoration, and clothing were other common investments chosen over relocation.⁷¹

Transplanted Irish Community Culture in Five Points

In Ireland, town rituals and exchanges commonly drove social interaction, based around events such as regular market dates and special festivals. The transition of these interactions from Ireland to New York City was seamless. The Irish settled closely together whenever

⁷⁰ Non-Lansdowne immigrants saved an extra \$30, on average. Anbinder, *Five Points*, 138-140.

⁷¹ Ibid, 140, 136.

possible in communities such as Five Points, preferring accommodation next to family or old neighbours. Gatherings on both sides of the Atlantic celebrating immigration were regular occurrences. “American wakes” saw the immigrants off in Ireland, and “greenhorns” were welcomed into Five Points with neighbourhood “kitchen rackets” on Saturday nights. Kitchen Rackets were more than just parties. Community leaders used the event to orientate new arrivals, help them find work, most often with their same labour employers, housing if they were not yet orientated, and even spouses.⁷² The community was its own support system and safety net.

Irish interaction and cohesion in a populous urban community also revolved around the specific physical environments of the tenement, the public square, the saloon, and the Catholic parish. A growing, chaotic city was well suited to host crowds of people to interact and conduct business freely face to face. These four areas housed the Irish subculture as places to congregate, converse, and organise their political or punitive actions. They hosted the formation of all community organisations. Organisation activities could range from basic planning for school, church and hospital infrastructure, more ambitious trade unions and fraternal groups, and even Democratic political “machines” or riotous mobs. This physical structure of street vendors, apartment blocks, and downtown offices, an inseparable intermingle of the functional with the social, still exists in areas of New York City today, though highly gentrified. Almost all of these groups were formed organically in the community, and in Five Points they were independently Irish.⁷³

The home was a shanty or more commonly a tenement apartment where the wife raised the children, cooked and worked, the children were born and raised, the father rested, and the neighbours visited. The tenements could vary from the large, five story brick building at 472

⁷² Shannon, *American Irish*, 34; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 139.

⁷³ Doyle, “Remaking of Irish America,” 215.

Pearl Street, built in 1850, to the wood-framed two and half story tenement right beside it at 474 Pearl, built as early as 1790.⁷⁴ Composed of only two or three rooms and a single window, the tenement apartment offered no real privacy for its many inhabitants. Fortunate families could afford to rent an entire apartment for themselves. Even then, a family could be composed of a husband and wife, brothers, sisters or cousins of either, and any number of their children. More commonly an apartment was sublet to at least one boarder. Frugal tenants subletting one of their rooms to another family helped combat the surprisingly high cost of rent, ranging from \$3 to \$7 a month. Almost 30,000 of the least fortunate tenants across New York City in 1850 habited the cellar-level apartments, which would flood with water and raw sewage with any substantial precipitation. These cheapest dwellings were unsanitary reminders that Five Points was constructed in an artificially created marshland, and unsurprisingly led to higher rates of disease and mortality.⁷⁵ In all, the tenement block was a crowded environment that forced social activities out into different areas, and yet fostered close interpersonal and community ties out of necessity.

The Old Brewery, Cow Bay, and Mulberry Bend were the most dilapidated neighbourhoods, all with a substantial Irish contingent by the 1850s. In general, the closer one approached to Five Points intersection and Paradise Square, the poorer the housing conditions became. Perhaps this should not be surprising given that all three areas were underwater in the days of the Collect Pond and built over filled in soil.⁷⁶ It can thus be hard to describe what

⁷⁴ Brighton, *Historical Archaeology of the Irish Diaspora*, 157-158.

⁷⁵ A three room apartment in a better working class neighbourhood cost \$8.50 in rent each month, meaning Five Points rents were the lowest in New York City. Still, they were certainly comparatively high given the run-down nature of the district. Local papers attributed the prices to greed on account of the landlords, who returned 17 to 26 percent on their investments per year. Sub-letters however could return profits of up to an incredible 300 percent each year. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 319; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 102-103, 457.

⁷⁶ Cow Bay was, according to rumour, named for an old cattle path to the Collect which the neighbourhood was built over. Given that maps suggest the neighbourhood was covered entirely by the Collect, this may be an apocryphal name. Anbinder, *Five Points*, 14-15, 91, 456.

exactly the “average” Five Points tenement was like. Crowding and conditions could be vastly different based upon the quality and purpose of the original building, whether a towering converted brick tenement like the Old Brewery or the variable wood two and a half story tenements along Mulberry Bend. One their visit to Cow Bay in May of 1857 The Five Points House of Industry reported,

Visited twenty-three families to-day at the upper end of Mission-row, “Cow-bay.” One hundred and seventy-nine inmates congregated in fifteen rooms. But one room presented, even in a small degree, any air of neatness or comfort, and in nearly all, the most common necessities were wanting, while in their place vice, filth, and extreme wretchedness were on all sides depicted. In five instances, intoxicating drinks were vended in the rooms where these miserable people live...⁷⁷

No more than two blocks away at 31 Baxter Street lived families like Mary Shea of Kenmare and her husband Jeremiah from Cork with their twenty-three year old daughter and a single lodger. At the same building lived labourers Patrick Hagerty, brother Daniel and Daniel’s wife Mary, with enough income to forgo lodgers altogether. The press, as they would today, tended to focus on examples of squalor rather than cases like the Hagerty clan. As a general rule, one could still describe the “average” Five Point tenement living as uncomfortable. Over half of the district’s apartments crammed in six or more people along with beds, furniture, all kitchen equipment and food, and all personal possessions into a 225 square foot space.⁷⁸

The saloon was the political and social square of the greater community. Due to a very real and unfortunate association between the Irish and alcoholism, the saloonkeeper was one of the community’s most familiar faces. Along with grocers, who primarily sold alcohol, saloonkeepers were a source for local news and politics to their neighbourhood while socialising

⁷⁷ L.M. Pease, editor, “Extracts from the Superintendant’s Journal,” *Monthly Record of the Five Points House of Industry* 1 (June 1857), 70.

⁷⁸ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 72-73, 91-97.

with customers.⁷⁹ Saloons also made excellent meeting halls. Irishmen naturally extended their personal loyalties in labour and family life to their social and political surroundings. For men, the saloon was a well-known, spacious, and comfortable environment to mix the social with political. As established, urban America had limited occupational mobility for the Irish. Nevertheless, ambitious individuals found it possible to enhance their personal standing and family's welfare by combining small, community-based business ventures with political action. Local saloons offered the ideal centre for the connection between business and politics. Free lunches could be offered, negotiations conducted over drinks, information exchanged, and job contacts created. In the Irish community, nobody hosted more business meetings or political dealings than the saloonkeeper. This role, afforded saloonkeepers a respected and revered position, which could turn into positions of political advancement.⁸⁰

Multiple subcultures collected together in the popular saloons which dotted lower Manhattan, such as the famous Arena at 28 Park Row just outside of Five Points, or "Big Jerry Tappen's" on Pearl near Elm, where the bare earth fighting ring often led to muddy pugilistic affairs. Each saloon offered the opportunity to drink, fight, and gamble, which for some skilled enough at all three made the saloon the basis for their entire lifestyle. For the rest, the saloon remained the gruff, seedy and rowdy escape which made Five Points culture distinctive.⁸¹

Irish drinking patterns were notorious dating back to the days on Erin, and when transferred to an American setting, helped bring the Irish into politics. In addition to saloons, grocers were everywhere, the two businesses often lining the ground floors of Five Points

⁷⁹ Grocers did carry foodstuffs, but most staple supplies were bought at the weekly market. Ibid, 26.

⁸⁰ The Irish most often supported friends and relatives to represent them politically, and the Irish saloonkeeper was a friend to many. Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, 203; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 145-146, 231-232.

⁸¹ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 182.

intersections.⁸² Irish drinking habits brought them to these areas where the most dangerous and radical characters of their era resided. The saloon presented itself as a working-class haven, perhaps looked down upon by the elite, but a welcome sight for all New York labourers and rowdies. Walt Whitman, one of New York's most famous and favoured sons, adored the Bowery saloons on the eastern edge of Five Points from Chatham Square northward, as "the most heterogeneous melange of any street in the city: stores of all kinds and people of all kinds are able to be met with every forty rods." As opposed to the *haute culture* on Broadway, it was "the Cheapside of New York; the place of the People; the resort of mechanics and the labouring classes; the home and the haunt of a great social democracy.... You may be the President, or a Major General, or be Governor, or be Mayor, and you will be jostled and crowded off the sidewalk just the same."⁸³

Heavy Irish drinking habits also had their cost. Much of the Irish crime was related to alcohol abuse, and the grocers, saloons, and basement dives lining the Bowery perpetuated the community's issues with drinking. Even ad hoc "shebeens," or drink stands on public works sites, were beloved by the Irish as a respite from their jobs, but as a practice were actually encouraged by subcontractors to keep the Irish easier to influence.⁸⁴ A lower class saloon as described by Herbert Asbury shows the environment of alcoholism lower Manhattan fostered:

In many of the lower class places, in the early days, drinks were three cents each and no glasses were used. Barrels of fiery spirits stood in shelves behind the bar, and poured out their contents through lines of slender rubber hose. The customer, having deposited his money on the bar, took an end of the hose in his mouth, and was entitled to all he could drink without breathing. The moment he stopped for a breath the watchful bartender turned off the supply, and nothing would start it again but another payment. Some of the Bowery bums became so expert at swallowing, and were able to hold their breaths for

⁸² Ibid, 191-193.

⁸³ Walt Whitman, *Walt Whitman of the New York Aurora, editor at twenty-two* (State College, PA: Bald Eagle Press, 1950), 18.

⁸⁴ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 79, 319.

such a long period, that they could get delightfully drunk for three cents. One famous saloon, on Baxter street near the Bowery, provided and extensively advertised a rear chamber called the “velvet room.” When a good customer was reduced to a nickel, he was given an extra large bowl of liquor and escorted with considerable ceremony into the “velvet room,” where he was permitted to drink himself unconscious, and sleep until the effects of the potation wore off.⁸⁵

A scan through the New York County District Attorney’s indictment records yields similar case studies of alcoholism and degradation. Henry Homer, a young man only 23 years of age living in the neighbouring fourth ward east of Five Points at 147 Cherry Street, had been arrested for assaulting another man with a slung-slot to the head on April 27th, 1857. He pled guilty on June 18th offering only in his own defence, “I was so much intoxicated that I did not know what I was doing.” It is possible that Homer was engaged in “skylarking,” a drinking binge and bar crawl where the participants actually had the goal of insulting, harassing, and generally creating chaos wherever they went.⁸⁶

Catholicism, contemporarily and today, is widely associated with the Irish-American community. In terms of the Irish Diaspora to New York City, the Irish-American identity of interest is a Catholic identity. Middle-class Protestants from Ulster, Munster, and Connacht counties immigrated to New York along with their Irish countrymen, if in smaller numbers, but tended not to settle in the slum districts dominated by Irish Catholics. Additionally, eighty-five to ninety percent of Irish immigrants were Roman Catholic dating back to the 1820s. As an identifier, Catholicism set Irish-Americans apart from other New Yorkers, even though the Irish religiosity was never particularly devout.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Asbury, *Gangs of New York*, 25.

⁸⁶ Although Homer is a British surname, the ward he called home almost certainly made this subject one of the working class. New York County District Attorney Indictment Records, June 16th to September 14th 1857, New York City Archives, New York City, New York; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 225.

⁸⁷ The Irish had never been strong Catholics in the traditional sense, and as early as 1855 the *New York Tribune* began publishing articles from ultramontane priests who sought to make local Catholics “more Roman and less

Irish-Americans, hardly a devout population in Erin, nevertheless grew more attached to the Church after migration as part of their community structure. In a community surrounded by harsh conditions, children and first-generation adults alike sought solace in the moral lessons of scripture, but also embraced community aspects of liturgy as a way to maintain close neighbourhood bonds.⁸⁸ The needs of the antebellum Irish-American community were highly practical, and so in turn were the goals of local parish houses. For instance, if a new church, which often doubled as a meeting hall, was to be built, the entire community needed to be involved. Years of budgeting and saving from tiny weekly donations was required, and even once constructed the building itself would not be fancy. Nevertheless, a church was a structure the whole community could use and be proud of because everyone had a part in creating it. The focus and discipline required for this task moulded many American Catholic clergy in the image of the community around them. That is, harbouring parochial, materialistic and culturally shallow worldviews, concerned with nothing larger than their own parish and community.⁸⁹

Of final note, the young Irish-American men, in this period mostly still children, who dominate the subject matter of the following chapter, believed far more in the ideals of American individualism than Catholic piety and the acceptance of suffering. Catholicism and scripture, as such, should be regarded in this study more as a token part of the 1850s New York Irish identity than a driving force behind it. Religion itself gained more attention as a Nativist complaint, to be discussed later, than from the Irish-Americans who utilised the institution as a medium for sharing and socialisation. The Irish community only accepted the tenets of the Church they found

Irish.” The continued belief in fairies is an example of pagan beliefs that the Irish retained into the nineteenth century. Doyle, “Remaking of Irish America,” 221, 241; Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 75, 274.

⁸⁸ J.P. Dolan, *The Immigrant Church: New York’s Irish and German Catholics, 1815-1865* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1983), devotes far more time and discussion to the subject of Irish American religious devotion than required for my needs on this topic. See in particular, 13-14, 21-22, 45-67, and 121-158.

⁸⁹ Shannon, *American Irish*, 35.

acceptable, such as the promotion of separateness from native society, while ignoring the denouncement of trade unions, wakes, and secret societies. Particular resistance was shown to the Five Points House of Industry's adoption system, which occasionally ripped "orphans" away from impoverished parents.⁹⁰ In fact, prior to 1852, when the Old Brewery was demolished to begin a slow physical transformation of the Points, the ward had for decades been a death knell for religious reconstruction and reform. In 1853, six churches had abandoned Five Points within the same number of years, and one minister described the area as an "idolatrous, Church-forsaken district."⁹¹

The Irish-American Identity

Urban life in America only hardened and intensified the independent community values formed on the Emerald Isle. The famine had tested the limits of government intervention in Britain, Ireland, and even the United States as the massive volumes of destitute immigrants arrived. In each case, official government action regarding famine relief was antiquated and narrow regarding the Irish. Bills providing federal aid to Ireland in both the United States House and Senate failed. Even had they passed, President Fillmore regarded the measures as unconstitutional and planned to veto them. By midcentury these harsh realities combined with extreme poverty and the rise of political Nativism led the Irish to determine as an ethnic group that they were on their own. As a result, their communities became highly insular, and their identities all the more 'Irish.' While instilling a communal sense of pride, this practice acted as its own burden. Government assistance was almost never actively sought, and the reliance in

⁹⁰ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 274, 326-327; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 256-266.

⁹¹ The Church of the Immigrants parish, later renamed to the Church of the Transfiguration, at 25 Mott Street, was one of only a few churches which survived, and still stands today. This is probably because the building was sold in 1853 by its Episcopal congregation to a Roman Catholic minister who appealed to the Irish in Five Points. Anbinder, *Five Points*, 241.

times of extreme misery fell upon the church, the community and the family, only adding to the burden of all.⁹²

In truth, the Irish community's completely independent self-perception was false. Though Irish suffering was undeniable and government aid inadequate, many non-governmental organisations lent support from both sides of the pond. Cities across New England set up their first major Catholic hospitals, orphanages, and welfare funds. Prominent individuals from diverse backgrounds and from across the nation also donated direct aid. Even the future Know Nothing leader Millard Fillmore, perhaps the greatest political enemy the antebellum Irish ever had in the United States, donated. Such efforts bore a great similarity to the assisted immigration efforts of the Irish landlords. Both were in general greatly appreciated, but overwhelmed by the continually growing volume of destitute poor. Overall, nobody donated more than the Irish themselves, sending on average 1.2 million pounds sterling home annually, mainly to fund passage for relatives, despite possessing such minor margins for fiscal generosity. The pecuniary balancing act of the family economy, pitted against remittances, church and community donations was the closest the Irish came to a "moral economy of the poor," at least until Jacob Riis inspired major reforms in the 1870s. Any financial generosity, even within the community, had to be balanced with American individualism, the limitations of short term labour contracts, and communal frugality.⁹³

Despite the hard conditions of the American city, letters from this era indicate immigrants were overwhelmingly content with their movement to America in general, and New York in particular. A committee of assisted immigrants from the ship *Aeolus* thanked their sponsors and

⁹² Doyle, "Remaking of Irish America," 217.

⁹³ The Irish in New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore raised \$623,193 in January of February of 1847 alone, compared to \$143,540 by general relief committees of the same cities from late 1846 to early 1848. Ibid; Schrier, *American Immigration*, 167.

suppliers for they “treated us kindly and with every attention to our wants, for which we shall ever be thankful.” Richard O’Gorman, though not representative of the typical Irish immigrant was a young middle-class lawyer who would later become Tammany judge under William “Boss” Tweed. When writing about his ease of assimilation into 1857 New York City, he turned the following phrase: “For myself I like it extremely, because I suppose, it likes me.”⁹⁴ Some immigrants may have romanticised Ireland, talk of returning to free their country from the British was a common unrealistic fantasy, and even a few did return either as success stories or all the more destitute. Palmerston native James Quinn’s sentiment was more common. He lived in Five Points and was known to imbibe in alcohol frequently, but he termed America “the best Country in the world.” His friend Pat McGowan agreed, and when discussing Ireland wondered “how did we stand it for so long a time?”⁹⁵

Over time, however, the circumstances of Five Points and other urban slums must not be underplayed. The adult Irish migrating into lower Manhattan had already constructed their cultural and community identities on the other side of the Atlantic. They arrived with a fully-formed reference point for their own identity, one which they contrasted against their new surroundings. While the cultural identity of the first-generation immigrants could withstand these horrors, their children’s formative years lacked the Great Famine as a reference point for suffering.⁹⁶ Dreadful events and circumstances in antebellum Five Points left a more formative impression to the children than to their parents, who eventually constructed a similar, but altered identity. Contemporary sources were frequently exaggerated and prejudiced, but squalor, vice, and crime were indeed everywhere by the accounts of Five Pointers themselves. Alcohol was

⁹⁴ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 69; Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 314.

⁹⁵ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 135-137.

⁹⁶ For more on the perspectives Irish immigrants and their children constituted from the famine, see David Lloyd, “The Indigent Sublime: Specters of Irish Hunger,” *Representations* 92 (Fall 2005), 152-185.

omnipresent, domestic abuse or neglect common, and real individual cases of heartbreaking suffering are readily found.

Take for instance, the life of “Little Katy.” Little Katy was the focus of Solon Robinson’s famous 1853 moralist short story collection *Hot Corn*, named after the street food commonly peddled in New York by young girl vendors. Robinson described meeting her:

I discovered the owner of the hot corn cry, in the person of an emaciated little girl about twelve years old, whose dirty shawl was nearly the color of the rusty iron, and whose face, hands, and feet, naturally white and delicate, were grimed with dirt until nearly of the same color. There were two white streaks running down from the soft blue eyes, that told of the hot scalding tears that were coursing their way over that naturally beautiful face.

Little Katy, according to Robinson, was exhausted but afraid to go home to her alcoholic mother without selling all of her corn for fear of catching a beating. Robinson bought the last of her corn, threw it out, and gave the child bread money for her and her sister, with instructions not to tell her mother. His efforts would prove futile, as Katy fell ill and died in the autumn of 1853. It was suggested the illness came from staying out too late in the cold night vending, and that her death arrived swiftly following a beating from her mother.⁹⁷

Hot Corn not only inspired a spike in donations to the Five Points House of Industry and controversial “adoption” efforts, but sold very well, over fifty thousand copies, more “than any since *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” according to the diary of George Templeton Strong.⁹⁸ It is also only one example of showing how conditions in *Five Points* were still unquestionably horrid. Most crimes lay on par with rates in the rest of the city, but public drunkenness and prostitution were rampant. Saloons were everywhere, and a floor of almost every saloon contained a brothel. Alcoholic husbands beat their wives, alcoholic mothers beat their children, yet domestic violence

⁹⁷ Solon Robinson, *Hot Corn: Life Scenes in New York* (New York: De Witt and Davenport, 1854), 44-48, 108-114.

⁹⁸ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 130.

was often overlooked. Destitution and the allure of a far superior income drove many young women to prostitution.⁹⁹ Life in antebellum lower Manhattan was difficult, surrounded by temptations for temporary relief which all too often led to the ultimate failure.

Conclusion

In general, the famine generation American-Irish adopted the social systems of their native land to establish an economic foothold and retain their cultural familiarity in urban America. The bonds of a tight knit community were formed in turmoil and starvation, even before the Great Famine led to a massive spike in emigration to the eastern seaboard. For the first generation of migrants, this insular Irish community alone satisfied their needs. They compared their lives, often still filled with hardship, with their near death experiences of the famine. Improving their lives involved modest physical means and enduring saving. For their children who faced native-born American oppression and violence determined to stunt Irish opportunities, the social systems would need to adapt and grow. This would come to include interconnected forays into politics and an underworld, as individuals were willing to criminally infiltrate the system for social advancement and economic gain.

By the time many second and third generation Irish became young men, a shift was occurring in the community's focus. A child whose parents had traveled to the United States in the 1830s or earlier, such as Isaiah Rynders or John Morrissey, grew up surrounded by the rush and rowdiness of the city. Even a ten-year-old boy who immigrated to New York City in 1850, at the height of the famine, was a young man by the summer of 1857. Further, many of these boys had grown up with little or no fatherly influences. Most male first generation immigrants worked as urban labourers, and many died in work accidents by the age of 40. This was so common that

⁹⁹ A full-time prostitute earned on average \$10 weekly, far more than any legitimate female profession. Ibid, 4, 216.

in contemporary plays, the Irish widow was a staple character, as the head of household after the paterfamilias had died or sometimes fled the family. The second and third generation Irish males therefore had great admiration and appreciation for their mothers, and likewise held no interest in ending up like their fathers.¹⁰⁰

If the first generation Irish immigrants acquired only a basic foothold in America, the males of the following generations actively sought upward mobility in wealth and society. Many children from widowed families had worked odd jobs such as peddlers, errand-boys or even simple beggars in the street since five or six years of age to help support the family. As young men, work was already a tedious task for them, and they sought other opportunities. Five Points and other slum neighbourhoods had no shortage of vices, legal or otherwise, to potentially exploit. Liquor, gambling, prostitution, pugilism, pick pocketing, graft, and the combination of them all, politics, all held the potential for payoffs greater than backbreaking labour fourteen hours daily to take home a dollar or less. A certain pride was to be held in not working, and instead supporting oneself with seedier talents. The ideal of the “Sporting Man” was born.

¹⁰⁰ Shannon, *American Irish*, 35-36.

Chapter Two

Saloons, Gangs, and Shirtless Democracy: The Rise of the Manhattan Underworld

Isaiah Rynders was perhaps not the first sporting man and mob boss, but he certainly was the first to become wildly successful and famous. Rynders was not prototypically Irish Catholic. He was born in Albany in 1804 to a German-American father and Irish Protestant mother, forever challenging his true acceptance into the Irish community. Rynders was favourably described by a contemporary as “a lithe, dark, handsome man of medium size and sinewy form, with a prominent nose, and piercing black eyes – a knowing smile, and a sharp look altogether.” Rynders’ popularity and divisiveness certainly stemmed from being a man suited to his own era, as the same source praises the efficient and crowd pleasing manner in which he led a torchlight procession of twenty thousand through the streets before Election Day in 1844 and on another occasion conducted the last public hanging of a pirate, Albert W. Hicks, with “his usual impressive dignity.” He was often referred to as either “Ike” or “Captain,” the latter a title given to him in his youth while leading a mercantile sloop boat on the Hudson.¹⁰¹

This chapter will explore how settled Irish-Americans combined their cultural practices with American traditions of popular disorder to gain economic and political power in antebellum New York City. The Irish gangs employed acts of collective violence for political uses, particularly on election days. From 1845 to 1854 they formed the basis for an urban underworld, sought political power through electioneering, attacked those representing the New York elite, and stood fast against anti-immigrant Nativist politicians. Young ambitious Irish males looking to achieve more than just the survival foothold of their parents, found their passions, profit, and their place in New York City through political activity. These gangs grew so drastically in power

¹⁰¹ Rynders, a second generation immigrant with Protestant Irish ties, allegedly killed a man in a knife duel over a gambling grudge in Mississippi in 1832. Thomas L. Nichols, *Forty Years of American Life* (London: J. Maxwell and Company, 1864), 2: 159-163; 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), 141-142.

that gang activity and community approval were requirements for a successful New York politician in the antebellum era.

Forming a Political Underworld

Lower Manhattan in the antebellum era birthed an entire proto-gangster culture. Rather than the better known gangs of prohibition, however, everything about the gangs of antebellum New York City involved politics and community. The term “mob boss,” for instance, comes from Five Points, referring to a mob primary. The primary’s structure, unlike today, was simple. At a peak market period, an aspiring political leader stood on an upside-down milk crate or soap box and orated until a crowd, or mob, formed around him. If the mob approved of the man and his message, they would sign his candidacy petition for public office. Like many of today’s successful candidates, the best supported orators were well known in the community. In Five Points this could be a saloonkeeper, who might offer a drink, food, or a mattress in his back bunks in exchange for a vote. Ambitious and rougher characters who believed the ends justified the means could take matters one step further, and support their candidate through any manner of criminal activities. This might mean busting up opposition meetings, stuffing ballot boxes, or intimidating voters. Through these simple, mutually beneficial relationships, politics became inexorably entangled with community and crime. In short order, political leaders and their rowdies, already willing to break the law for electoral purposes, built entire networks of illegal businesses in lower Manhattan. Mob leaders might run a gambling den, burglary ring, prostitution house, unlicensed bar, or organise underground boxing matches. New York City’s underworld was born, and from the very beginning the gangs were inseparably linked to public

politics. Thus, the “mob boss” ruled over an unsavoury but powerful group who could potentially sway an election, generate significant profits, and hold a great deal of power.¹⁰²

Rynders founded New York City’s Empire Club in 1844, a gang of several hundred Democratic fighting men, to rally support for James K. Polk over Whig William Henry Clay. Reinforcing the value of the saloon to the community, politics, and gangs, the Empire Club met regularly in a public house on 27 Park Row, one of several networked saloons Rynders owned. The Empire club’s interjections into the 1844 Presidential election were widely regarded to have delivered New York, and consequently the Presidency, to Polk. The use of political thugs was not new in 1844, but the proto-machine system of politics connected to a single purpose across the city was. This very system became the foundation for the rise of Tammany Hall, which controlled New York’s politics for much of the reconstruction era. Rynders’ machine politics were so successful that he even brought the system on the road in the 1850s, visiting and installing his tactics in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New Orleans.¹⁰³

Antebellum Gang Culture in New York City

Understanding antebellum New York City’s underworld culture is critical to understanding how the Empire Club and other gangs became so powerful. I will begin by defining the unique terminology of lower Manhattan’s subculture. A “sporting man,” or “old sport” like Isaiah Rynders was among the most rarefied of antebellum rowdies. Sporting men were street-level professional gangsters who by definition did not hold “regular” employment, making their living through political or subculture-related extralegal means. Their leadership

¹⁰² T.J. English, *Paddy Whacked: The Untold Story of the Irish American Gangster* (New York: ReganBooks, 2005), 26.

¹⁰³ Out of 486,000 ballots cast in New York in 1844, Polk won by just 5,100 votes. New York’s 36 electoral votes were key to the President’s victory, who would have lost without them. Ibid, 27; Anbinder *Five Points*, 143.

alone needed to earn the respect of the community and men around them. All sporting men valued their leisure time and, when not focused on politics, New York's sporting man subculture increased their income through the alcohol, gambling, or boxing industries. The Irish in particular dominated illegal prizefighting and gambling, with famous figures such as Yankee Sullivan, Tom Hyer, and John Morrissey. Along with a myriad of surrounding contemporary groups, the sporting subculture operated out of saloons, spoke its own dialect, and would often publish its own propaganda newspapers.¹⁰⁴

To maintain leadership and respect in antebellum New York City, sporting men required a specific physical skill-set. All sports were fighters, at minimum capable pugilists, though many had additional weapons of choice. Rynders was famously skilful with a knife, as were a number of his contemporaries with bladed weapons. His second at the Empire Club, John S. Austin, was reportedly skilful with a Bowie knife, and Bowery B'hoys William Poole became wildly famous for his skill with a cleaver in the 1850s. In antebellum America, fistfights were reserved only for gentlemanly, if illegal, pugilism contests. Violence more routinely involved pistols, hatchets, brickbats, knives, slung shots, brass knuckles, spiked clubs, claws and boot heels. Rioters in their own right would frequently make use of loose bricks at construction sites and other improvised rubble as projectiles. When a sporting man's words and intimidation failed to push a point across as desired, the street brawls were brutal with a high potential for lethality.¹⁰⁵

The Bowery B'hoys were a famous and colourful street subculture that exploded onto the political and cultural scene of the era. The precise origins of the term, like all philological speculations on this era, are unknown. Regardless, the term "b'hoys," pronounced "buh-hoy," was

¹⁰⁴ Certain trades and hobbies, to be discussed in this chapter, were seen as exceptions to the Sporting subculture's definition of a working man, including professional boxers, saloonkeepers, policemen, printers, and firemen. Anbinder, *Five Points*, 181-184.

¹⁰⁵ English, *Paddy Whacked*, 17; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 143-144.

used in New York as early as 1834 to describe a working class man amused by adventure, alcohol, and action. By the 1840s, a style of dress that was made to be noticed had formed. A “Bowery B’hoy” marching through the streets around Paradise Square or the Brewery in *propria persona* wore a:

black silk hat, smoothly brushed, sitting precisely upon the top of his head, hair well oiled, and lying closely to the skin, long in front, short behind, cravat a-la sailor, with the shirt collar turned over it, vest of fancy silk, large flowers, black frock coat, no jewelry (sic), except in a few instances, where the insignia of the engine company to which the wearer belongs, as a breastpin, black pants, one or two years behind the fashion, heavy boots, and a cigar about half smoked, in the left corner of the mouth, as nearly perpendicular as it is possible to get. He has a peculiar swing, not exactly a swagger, to his walk, but a swing, which nobody but a Bowery boy can imitate.

Other descriptions include variations or additions such as a beaver hat (though always a high top), full pantaloons turned up at the bottom over the boots, and a girl on his arm, but the greased “soap locks” were always standard. The look was distinctive and meant to look sharp, but also had practical elements. The boots were deliberately heavy, able to be used in a slaughterhouse, at the scene of a fire, and for stomping in the case of a brawl. The look and attitude of a B’hoy exhibited pride, independence, and a distaste for the affectations of the self-stylised “aristocracy,” the upper classes, which made him a political radical. The message was that ostentatious clothing and attitudes did not separate the rich from the working classes, that money did not give the rich any natural rights above others, and neither would it be allowed to give the rich any extra political rights.¹⁰⁶

A prototypical urban gangster was a young male in his teens or twenties from either the middle or lower class. His preferred trades and hobbies emphasised or celebrated masculinity: volunteer firemen in the tradition of George Washington, butchers for their expertise with a

¹⁰⁶ George G. Foster, *New York by Gas-light: With Here and There a Streak of Sunshine* (New York: Dewitt & Davenport, 1850), 103-104; Charles Haynes Haswell, *Reminiscences of an Octogenarian of the City of New York: (1816 to 1860)* (New York: Harper, 1896), 271; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 178-179.

blade, printers for their ability to spread propaganda, and policemen for their authority.¹⁰⁷ The gangs of New York operated out of two major staging areas – Paradise Square and the Bowery. Five Points housed mainly Irish gangs often ethnically recognisable by their name, including The Forty Thieves, Kerryonians, Shirt Tails, Chichesters, Patsy Conroys, Plug Uglies, and Roach Guard. The Bowery on the other hand attracted the native-born clubs, including the Bowery Boys, True Blue Americans, and the American Guard. Directly determining the power factions and membership of these underworld, variably sized and structured organisations is all but impossible, and a detailed individual differentiation will not be attempted here. The composition of the units were often fluid, just as political bonds could be, and the makeup of a club from one year to another could change drastically. As an example of another complication, some of the political band names found in antebellum newspapers like Dead Rabbits, and in particular, Bowery Boys, were used more often to indicate a union of several clubs fighting under a single banner than to indicate a single group. It does appear that each group often travelled in packs, and identified themselves by the colours and clothing they wore as well as the street names they and their meeting hall occupied. Plug Uglies for instance, wore enormous padded hats stuffed with wool and leather then pulled down over their ears to act as helmets in a brawl, while the Roach Guard wore pants with blue stripes.¹⁰⁸

The B'hoy boldly expressed his independence from European governments and displayed his rise out of poverty, but independence did not mean irresponsibility. According to George G. Foster, a reporter and social commentator for Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*, a Bowery

¹⁰⁷ Peter Adams, *The Bowery Boys: Street Corner Radicals and the Politics of Rebellion* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005), 18-19.

¹⁰⁸ Gangs were estimated to range anywhere from ten to a hundred members. Sources on the makeup of the gangs themselves come from contemporary rumours and publications wishing to sensationalise. As such, the origin of the names and colours for each band should be regarded more as best estimations than hard facts. English, *Paddy Whacked*, 17-18; Herbert Asbury, *The Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1928), 19-21.

B'hoys was admirable for "his consistency and faithfulness to his domestic duties and responsibilities – his open abhorrence of all "nonsense" – the hearty manner in which he stands up on all occasions for his friend, and especially his indomitable devotion to fair play – bespeak for him and his future destiny our warmest sympathies and our highest hopes."¹⁰⁹ While undoubtedly an American character that adventured across the nation but felt most at home on the Bowery, the B'hoys was still a proud community figure, and was embraced as part of the Irish push for progress in American society.

The B'hoys's societal acceptance probably had a great deal to do with participation in labour, their primary distinction from a sporting man. Though active in saloons and politics, a B'hoys "was not an idler and corner lounge, but mostly an apprentice," a reference not only to their employment, but often their youth. B'hoys could be labourers, clerks, grocers, or if better off, shipbuilders, carpenters, butchers, and even printers. Their female counterpart, a G'hal, frequently worked at a printers, sewers, or press-room. All were part of a new urban proletariat.¹¹⁰ A sporting man emulated the aristocratic lifestyle, producing nothing but enjoying the luxuries of everything, while a working class B'hoys never forgot his community roots. The B'hoys never forgot his humble lower Manhattan upbringing, where he witnessed members of his community work hard for little reward. Contemporary social commentator John Griscom demonstrated a clear link between the poor living and working conditions in antebellum lower Manhattan and the rise of a gang subculture like the Bowery B'hoys. "In times of riot and tumult, he notes, "the disturbers of the peace [are] from the cellars and alleys where they have never been taught to respect themselves, much less others." As a relative outsider, Griscom related the

¹⁰⁹ Foster, *New York by Gas-light*, 101-102.

¹¹⁰ Those aged 16 to 45 comprised 57 percent of New York City's population by 1850, only half of which saw any formal education. Haswell, *Reminiscences of an Octogenarian*, 270-271; Richard B. Stott, *Workers in the Metropolis: Class, Ethnicity, and Youth in Antebellum New York City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1990), 74.

rising New York City gang culture to a socio-cultural version of the medical diseases which frequently struck Five Points. For those within Five Points, rising gang culture was more like a vaccination – a way to shine light on the inequalities present in their community and to express the angry fervour in the hearts of New York City’s underbelly.¹¹¹

In particular, antebellum serials were an excellent way for unsatisfied radicals to grow their political voice, or simply for opportunists to grow wealthy. The most talented radicals could do both. In his prime, Mike Walsh contributed to his community as a lithographic printer. He established a subversive newspaper, aptly named the *Subterranean*, in 1843. The paper expanded the Irish voice in American politics, although enemies also charged that Walsh and his associates used journalism to become rich through blackmail. Papers like the Walsh’s laid the groundwork for community interest serials like the *Irish-American* by offering a different viewpoint than the Whig/Republican *Tribune*, and the anti-slavery Democrats in the *Times*.¹¹² Of course, printing a radical political newspaper carried risks. The *Subterranean* only survived two years before a second libel conviction and jail sentence for its founding editor halted publication, an experience Walsh referred to as a wound honourably suffered for the republican cause.¹¹³

Walsh served his libel sentence for only four weeks in the Tombs prison with his good friend George Wilkes. The two were pardoned by Democratic Governor Silas Wright, and Wilkes emerged with a pamphlet detailing corruption in the police and criminal justice system. The pamphlet is an excellent example of how shrewd politicians, like Walsh and Wilkes, could manipulate and profit from the power of the press. In the midst of the scandal, Walsh rode public

¹¹¹ John Hoskins Griscom, *The Sanitary Condition of the Laboring Population of New York: With Suggestions for Its Improvement* (New York: Harper, 1845), 2-24; Adams, *Bowery Boys*, xv.

¹¹² The *Tribune*’s editor, Horace Greeley, was a leading Whig and later Republican statesman whose voice directed his paper. Fissures in the Democratic Party created a number of different factions in the Jacksonian and Antebellum eras, details of which are not pertinent to this thesis.

¹¹³ Adams, *Bowery Boys*, 160; Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and White Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Verso, 2003), 207.

outrage into public office with a comfortable sinecure position, and Wilkes founded *The Police Gazette*, one of the nation's longest running dailies. Wilkes' daily helped define a new culture of sensationalism, publishing exposes on professional criminals, pornography, and prostitution almost exclusively. The *Gazette* proved to be the evolution of the penny press and the precursor to Dime Novels, which exploded in popularity during the 1860s.¹¹⁴

The Sporting Man and the Bowery B'hoy were neither inherently pro-Irish nor anti-Irish underworld figures. Gangs and their leadership could get involved with any manner of political issues depending on the individuals guiding them. Rynders, for example, was never a friend of the Irish, particularly due to his association with Know Nothing Ned Bluntline. In his later career Rynders even renamed his faction *Americus*, after the American Party, to denote its anti-Irish stances. Mike Walsh's Spartan Foundation and Rynders' Empire Club actually fought frequently over turf disputes in the Sixth and Fourteenth wards. Still, both gangs could be considered Bowery B'hoys, lower Manhattan roughs able to be united against the affluent American "aristocracy" through street-level extralegal actions. Even Walsh himself, though often friendly to the Irish community, cared too greatly for his political fortunes and for social reforms benefitting all the proletariat to pigeon hole himself into an unbreakable allegiance with Irish-Americans.¹¹⁵

Within short measure, the Bowery B'hoy was a well known and assessable part of New York City's distinct and colourful milieu. As mentioned, a B'hoy was not necessarily an Irishman, or a native-born American, though there were many of both. The most basic requirements of a B'hoy were an ostentatious character, Democratic loyalty, and dutifulness to

¹¹⁴ Saxton, *White Republic*, 207-208; William V. Shannon, *The American Irish* (New York, MacMillan, 1963), 51-54.

¹¹⁵ Mike Walsh's *Subterranean* is an excellent example of these low-volume, locally distributed, and highly political newspapers. Adams, *Bowery Boys*, 30-31, 3; English, *Paddy Whacked*, 41; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 181, 142-144.

his community. In an era of great factionalism within the Democratic Party, Bowery B'hoys had no centralised control or regular organisation, but were locally directed by often disparate community leaders. The gang name 'Bowery Boys,' for instance, not to be confused with the larger B'hoy subculture, was adopted by a number of gangs in the antebellum era. Nativist actions were certainly undertaken under the moniker of Bowery Boy, but so were attacks against nativism. Gangs took pride in remaining "free and independent" from Tammany Hall, the Democratic Party's organised political machine in New York City. This is not to say the Bowery B'hoys lacked a local code of conduct or chain of command. When some of Mike Walsh's men attacked a "prominent" New Yorker in February 1847 "contrary to orders," Walsh publicly promised in the *Subterranean* that, "we will attend to them next week." The B'hoy became the proto-type for the politically organised gang in the antebellum era, pulling together disaffected youths into organised and independent factions.¹¹⁶

The Bowery B'hoy living legend naturally caught hold in popular subculture, and even in this arena both Irish and Nativist men could relate to depictions of a B'hoy. Playwright Benjamin Baker wrote the wildly popular *A Glance at New York*, which starred the fireman B'hoy Mose and his 'best girl' Lize. The names were short for Moses and Eliza, both of whom could never be mistaken as Irish Catholic titles, and yet it was contemporarily common for a Bowery B'hoy and G'hal to be referred to as Mose and Lizzie. Mose the character was a cigar-chomping butcher's helper, apprentice carpenter, or a stonecutter by trade, on top of his role as a volunteer fireman. He was also an unbeatable pugilist and a political rowdy who could toss lampposts at his adversaries like javelins. His politics, like those he represented, were strictly regional, and he

¹¹⁶ None of the "Bowery Boys" were more notable than those in Walsh's Spartan Foundation, one of the first and certainly among the most effective radicals of their era. Walsh's influence on gang culture spawned many imitators, marking his "great technical contribution to American politics." *The Subterranean*, February 27th, 1857, quoted in Adams, *Bowery Boys*, xvi; Ibid, xv-xxi, 16-17; Arthur M. Schlesinger, *Age of Jackson* (Little Brown: Boston, 1945), 408-409.

cared little for rural or western heroes. These combined roles made Mose the urban Paul Bunyan, an all-around hero for lower Manhattan's urban culture. No matter where he performed, Mose stood against the old elite in favour of the new urban mass culture. The actor who portrayed Mose on stage almost exclusively, Frank Chanfrau, was a former carpenter born in Five Points, and the character was said to be based upon an earlier Five Pointer, Moses Humphrey, a Mulberry Street grocer from 1827 to 1847.¹¹⁷

While only some of the most successful B'hoys were printers, all rowdies were required to be a volunteer fireman. Firefighters in this era had little in common with their modern counterparts. For all positions short of fire hall chief, antebellum firefighting was an unpaid, decentralised, and unregulated hobby. For B'hoys, the hobby was integrally blended with their jobs as saloonkeeper, printer, butcher, and labourer, because both roles were political. Becoming a volunteer firefighter was often a route into politics, and many Five Points politicians first gained notoriety as foremen for one of the fire companies in the ward. In Five Points, fire companies would just as likely be spotted rushing to break up a political meeting as fight a fire, and a few well placed companies frequently determined the difference between one candidate and another in a primary or general election. Out of political importance, some company members were recruited solely for their ability as fighters. With a total membership close to 4,000 by the mid 1850s, brigades each had their own distinctive traditions, insignia, and membership, and were a proving ground for honing skills in leadership, not to mention bluster, bravado, bravery, and brawling.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Both the 1848 'local drama' and particularly the character of Mose as portrayed by actor Frank Chanfrau were wildly popular and spawned a number of immediate sequels including *New York As It Is* (1848), *Three Years After* (1849), and *Mose in China* (1850). Haswell, *Reminiscences of an Octogenarian*, 271; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 181; Saxton, *White Republic*, 170; Adams, *Bowery Boys*, xviii.

¹¹⁸ The list of firemen which became political leaders includes Matthew T. Brennan, his brother Owen Brennan, Thomas P. Walsh, Michael Fitzgerald, Joseph Dowling, John Clancy, Morgan Jones, Walter Roche, Michael Brophy

Fire companies were often better organised than any contemporary working class organisation of their era. The legitimate roles they played in city safety and security played a factor, but so did the considerable armaments each brigade carried. Target and gun clubs formed within fire companies, taking on paramilitary structures of command. The discipline, access to arms including small artillery, and ability to easily organise and conduct rallies made many brigades double as political clubs. Throughout the 1840s and 1850s, these paramilitary companies were formed by not only the Irish, but Germans, French, Italians and Jews. Each wished to defend their cultural group's dignity, structure its cohesion and gain prestige.¹¹⁹

Fire organisations were so popular and politically valuable in New York City that companies created new roles in the station houses, in part to accommodate demand and in part to consolidate influence or increase profits. Runners were teenage volunteer apprentices who would not fight fires themselves, but were technically used to drag heavy equipment to its proper position during a blaze for the firefighters. Once this role was completed, runners would loot anything they could from burning homes, particularly upper classes properties, and fill in company ranks during battles on the streets. Attempts by the city to contain the risks to public order that armed antebellum fire brigades posed on the streets only further bolstered and politicised fire organisations. More political than practical forces, fire brigades even rioted in contempt of city council edicts rather than contain the flames during one of New York City's most destructive fires in August 1835.¹²⁰

and "Boss" William M. Tweed. Walsh's Spartans were connected to Howard Engine Company No. 34, while Brennan controlled No. 31. Anbinder, *Five Points*, 146; Adams, *Bowery Boys*, 18-19.

¹¹⁹ The numerous minority divisions probably would not have been necessary had the state militia been willing to admit immigrants prior to the Civil War. Ernst, *Immigrant Life*, 128-129.

¹²⁰ One particular incarnation of runners called June Bugs lasted only a short time in 1839 when Democratic mayor and fireman Issac L. Varian created twenty new hose companies loyal to Tammany without a single piece of fire equipment between them. The blatant political power grab backfired when existing companies remained true to their grassroots alliances. In the 1835 fire, 650 structures were destroyed and a staggering \$25 million in damages resulted. Adams, *Bowery Boys*, 18-24.

Blending Irish and American Cultural Identities

New York City's antebellum gang culture, particularly the Bowery B'hoy identity, mixed elements of Irish and American customs. Gang culture in New York pre-dated mass Irish immigration, and early on most first generation immigrants avoided American politics. Once the Irish established a stable community in Five Points, however, young Irishmen aggressively dove into politics, influencing gang customs. Traditions of Irish culture included more than family values and labour practices. Cultural resistance and subversive activities, however informal, were likewise regarded to be important lessons for an Irish child to learn. There was at least a partial dichotomy between Irish immigrant living culture and local gang culture, since the Sixth Ward was ground zero for political radicalism. The Irish gang and living communities together always ideally sought and could only completely embrace an entirely Irish Catholic figure as a leader in Five Points and New York. As an example, Mike Walsh was always accepted in Five Points for how he represented them favourably in the New York State assembly in 1846 and 1848. In March of 1853 the Sixth even saw fit to elect Walsh to a single term in the 33rd United States Congress, and he returned to New York City as a newspaper reporter in 1855. Throughout his time in New York, Walsh exemplified the audacious personality and lifestyle traits which later became synonymous with mob figures, but never lost his base support. He backed a number of radical movements and political bands with great bravado and directed acts of violence. His actions were representative of the personal and philosophical strengths and limitations of the era's Irish-American community – a combination of Irish resistance with American ambition.¹²¹

¹²¹ During his career Walsh involved himself in campaigns for President Tyler and John Calhoun, participated in the Mackay Act riots, and offered his gang's support in the Dorr rebellion. His resume, combined with the Spartan Foundation's influence and notoriety made Walsh probably the single most outstanding Irish Democrat of the antebellum era. Adams, *Bowery Boys*, 7-9, 53-61, 47-62, 118-120; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 154-158.

Even some gang names suggest links between Five Point political clubs and neighbourhood protectors or political guerrilla sects in Ireland. When put through Irish Gaelic linguistic analysis, New York club names may have been very roughly Anglicised versions of different rural Irish groups. According to an 1859 policeman's translation, The Plug Uglies are linked to the *bail ogleigh*, meaning member of the volunteers. The *pairt sa conradh*, or partners in league, became the Patsy Conroys, and the Dead Rabbits were either a reference to the bunny impaled on a pike the group was rumoured to carry into battle, or slang for a very big rowdy fellow.¹²²

Irish-American involvement with antebellum gangs not only made the gangs more Irish, but the Irish community more American. A B'hoy needed support from his community and his peers, but antebellum gang culture also offered the individual far more independence than civilian life. Many sporting men and Bowery B'hoys, including Isaiah Rynders for the majority of his career, operated in Five Points, yet did not live there. An independent man untethered to a family economy, a B'hoy's freedom could allow him to adventure clear across the nation. Mike Walsh's career included an excursion to Rhode Island, and another Irish Five Points figure, Yankee Sullivan, relocated to San Francisco in a fatal search for power and fortune. The sporting man and political rowdy living was a lifestyle choice open to many. Within reason, comparative outliers could be accepted in the Five Points political community, so long as candidates consolidated a substantial base of power.¹²³

Even on a civilian level, both contemporary newspapers and artefacts found in an archeological study of Five Points reflect the dual national loyalties of Irish-Americans. The

¹²² English, *Paddy Whacked*, 18.

¹²³ Walsh encouraged but did precious little in action to support the Dorr rebellion, and Sullivan's rough New York tactics applied to West Coast politics resulted in his arrest. The prospect of a long prison term made Sullivan slash his own wrists and bleed to death in his jail cell in 1855. Anbinder, *Five Points*, 180-182, 201-206.

Irish-American began publication in 1857. Its front pages and headlines were composed of local and state focused articles and advertisements, but the inside pages contained literature excerpts on transnational topics, ultra-Montaigne religious sermons, and news from a number of Irish counties. In the tenement buildings themselves, smoking pipes were discovered carrying images of the Celtic harp in conjunction with the American eagle. The harp was a symbol indicative of the United Irishman, and was later co-opted by the IRA. It was used as a reminder of injustices the Irish suffered at the hands of the British and support for Irish resistance through armed uprising. The eagle motif was a symbol for the Democratic Party, which pursued Irish approval after recognising their power as a voting bloc. Irish immigrants acted with a dual consciousness, negotiating their status in between community and freedom, dutifulness and opportunity, Irish and American.¹²⁴

Five Points' Irish descendants blended Irish and American society together from an early age through intersections between gang and community culture. An excellent example of this is the boyhood gang, a tradition dating back to Ireland which flourished in America. A microcosm of the B'hoy's ability to travel, young males in a youth gang experienced independence outside of the family and came into direct contact with New York City's urban culture. In the process, the boys grew into more Americanised men, setting themselves apart from the famine settlers. The key was that a gang allowed American individualism to be expressed within older Irish traditions of rebellion. A gang had its own constructions of the local community hierarchy and value system. Loyalty, obedience, and neighbourhood cooperation were learned at home, and aggression, audacity, and self interest had been fostered in schools. In gangs, all of these collided

¹²⁴ The Sixth Ward was so staunchly Democratic than in the 1856 Presidential election, the "Five Points Precinct" gave 574 votes to Democrat James Buchanan, and only 16 for Republican John Frémont, and 9 for Know Nothing Millard Fillmore. Anbinder, *Five Points*, 36; Brighton, *Irish Diaspora*, 160-161; See also the format of *The Irish-American*.

and altered to form a single identity: The Irish-American identity. Within the boyhood gang, the leader was owed deference. Groups primarily raided, thieved, and brawled, with or against other groups, most often fellow Irish lads, over disputes of varied reasonability. Gang hierarchies taught the boys obedience, but more importantly the value of one's own actions. Each gangster's reputation on the street was earned by the young ruffian himself. One's worth to the community, place in the pecking order, and even one's nickname depended upon one's actions alone. The children of the Auld Sixth Ward were an entire generation informally raised as rowdies, and if they reached adulthood, many were ready to join New York's political bands and clubs.¹²⁵

Gangs, Politics, and the Directed Use of Violence

Sporting men and Bowery B'hoys were both part of the antebellum era's Shirtless Democracy, a term coined and championed by Mike Walsh.¹²⁶ Used to describe New York City's radical Democratic factions, it expressed both the exclusive yet egalitarian views of working class politicians. Shirtless Democrats, sometimes called Subterraneans after Walsh's newspaper, believed politics should only be accessible to white males, but within these terms egalitarian policies dominated. Small-scale entrepreneurialism was favoured, as was a fairer distribution of property, where an "anti-rent" movement had some success breaking up large landholders, and 'elite' concentrations of capital were attacked. Policies did not request or include government redistribution, only the breakup of perceived reactionary and anti-democratic monopolies infringing on the rights of the proletariat. The "shirtless" moniker

¹²⁵ Even into the 1880s, mortality rates in Five Points were fifty percent above the city average, mostly due to disease, and child mortality rates were even higher. Shannon, *American Irish*, 36; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 133, 220, 358-359.

¹²⁶ The first evidence of the term "shirtless democracy" comes from a speech Walsh gave to the New York legislature after his 1847 election: "I came here, though called in derision – and of that I am proud – the advocate of a houseless and shirtless democracy." Joanna Innes and Mark Philp, *Re-imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions: America, France, Britain, Ireland 1750-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2013), 31-32.

denoted the movement's grassroots origins, a partisan underclass opposition wresting power from the top-down Democrats in Tammany Hall.¹²⁷

In an era of shirtless democracy, the gangs could not exist without politics, and vice versa, politics could not exist without gangs in the social structures of the city. Antebellum gangs were intrinsically tied to politics, just as a B'hoy was a gangster, a worker, and a politician all at once. The transition did not happen overnight. The proletariat became vastly more important to New York politics in general and elections in particular over the first half of the nineteenth century. New York State between 1821 and 1826 expanded suffrage to all white males twenty-one years old and above, removing all property holding requirements. The 1828 Presidential election was won by Andrew Jackson, a rough and tumble leader who proved that neither a background of affluence nor high society was required for political success. Over time class political conflict grew as voting workers felt capitalism was only enriching the elites, and controlling the ballot would empower the proletariat again. Beginning with the riots in the 1834 election, deference to the affluent elite American "aristocracy" was no longer part of neighbourhood politics. Appealing to a new electorate also required a new approach to campaigning, and in 1840, William Henry Harrison coined the "log cabin and hard cider campaign." Harrison's team used popular culture, negative campaigning, and false advertising to lionise their candidate's character into something he was not. President Harrison won the election, and made political rough play the new standard approach for elections, which in Five Points meant taking to the streets for specific and measurable gains.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Ibid; Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 372; Adams, *Bowery Boys*, xix, xxi, 26.

¹²⁸ The details of the 1840 Presidential election read like something from the theatre of the absurd. The campaign was not based upon political or national issues of importance, for neither candidate's personality or politics made them particularly distinguishable. Instead, Harrison's unremarkable war record was fictionalised into that of a hero with the song and slogan "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too" (or "Tip and Ty" for short), reinforced by parades, processions, floats, campaign collectables like kerchiefs or pins, banners, mass meetings, and concerts. Harrison, or 'Tip,' was rebranded into an approachable but rough around the edges Western figure connected to the people, while

Within a generation, working-class champions of the Shirtless Democracy appeared on the streets of New York City. Rynders, Walsh, and many other characters like John Kelly, Bill “The Butcher” Poole, Matthew Brennan and John “Old Smoke” Morrissey were all part of a rough and tumble mob approach to democracy and electioneering. They discovered political rough play could earn gang leaders significant rewards through bribes and patronage. As an example, Rynders was awarded a well-paid sinecure as “measurer” at the New York Customhouse by President Polk for effectively stealing the 1844 election on behalf of the Democrats. Such appointments either offered their own measure of political power, or allowed sporting men to entirely devote their time to gambling and politics. Beneath the power and rewards, these men truly did take an active interest in the issues of the day, and more often than not represented views held in some of America’s lower-class communities.¹²⁹

New York City lacked any true centralised control until the mid-1850s, and gangs were left to chaotically operate at their own behest. Political clubs chose and fought for their own candidates to run against or enter into Tammany Hall. Ruffians appeared at the polls for all parties, but as previously discussed, most of immigrant-dominated antebellum New York City was loyal to the Democratic Party, and so were the gangs. Less partisan club hobbies in the vice industry were more varied and less predictable. Over the long term, the unchecked daily activities of smaller political clubs and larger political machines together became the basis for organised crime in the United States. Corruption, graft, illegal gambling and prostitution, street

his opponent, incumbent Martin Van Buren was depicted as an elitist snob, when in reality the opposite was closer to the truth. Even though the campaign succeeded, the elderly Harrison served only one month as President before dying of pneumonia. Adams, *Bowery Boys*, 3-7, 45-46; Irwin Silber, *Songs America Voted By* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole, 1971), 33-45.

¹²⁹ Innes and Philp, *Re-imagining Democracy*, 31-32; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 144, 295.

level extortion and fraud all grew in the power struggle within and between political clubs ambitiously trying to advance themselves.¹³⁰

Fractures in the antebellum era Democrats ran so deep that municipally the party was really a patchwork of Ward-level political clubs. Each group had power, but only token legitimacy, and none were above political opportunism, able to shift towards the popular opinion in pursuit of consolidating power. As Mike Walsh stated in 1846 upon his election to the New York State Assembly in 1846, “I am the slave of no party, a follower of no political clique. I came here with my merits and demerits extensively canvassed. I am proud; the advocate of a houseless and shirtless democracy.”¹³¹ Irish Five Pointers supported men like Walsh in particular, and more generally the Democrats, simply because the Whig Party and the Federalists before them held great hostility towards foreigners, and were too elitist to change. Even Tammany itself had originally formed with anti-Irish values but, unlike the aforementioned, dying national parties knew to shift their views with changing demographics and the expansion of suffrage.¹³²

Five Points was easily mobilised into politics and gang culture due to their homogeneous settlement patterns, as detailed in Chapter One. Racial segregation and cultural dichotomies in the neighbourhood were almost absolute. Eighty-four percent of all Kerry immigrants lived in just two of the neighbourhood’s twenty blocks, both of which lined the Five Points intersection. Of all the blocks surrounding Paradise Square, sixty-four percent of the Irish Catholic population came from Kerry, and almost eighty percent of those were from the Lansdowne estate. Bonds of

¹³⁰ English, *Paddy Whacked*, 6.

¹³¹ Walsh’s victory was secured with blatant election fraud in cahoots with Tammany officials and by successfully defeating Rynders’ attempts to block the nomination. Adams, *Bowery Boys*, 7, 32, 107-108.

¹³² The Whigs did in desperation attempt to court the Irish vote in the late half of the 1850s, but fell short. The Irish knew they were being patronised, particularly when issues like prohibition were not taken out of the party platform. Shannon, *American Irish*, 49-51.

clanship had emigrated directly over from one nation to another.¹³³ Irish clannishness was expressed not only in their neighbourhood, but in street gangs, volunteer fire companies, political clubs, and mob action. The insular, self conscious nature of the Irish community was encouraged for political purposes, including the unofficial acceptance of St. Patrick's Day as an annual holiday to express ethnic solidarity and strength, while the Irish themselves also related the holiday to notions of nationalism and anti-British resentments.¹³⁴ Irish-American community unity made acts of collective violence an indicator for class discontent and struggle in the 1850s, a fact noticed by political leaders and writers alike. Describing the nature of New York City's popular resistance, Walsh in 1843 told his followers, "New York is to the Union what Paris is to France – what ancient Rome was to its vast Empire – what the heart is to the body." A decade later, Whitman, always poetically proud of New York City, felt the city laid claim to a particular superlative:

I have been at Washington and know none of the great men. But I know the people. I know well (for I am practically in New York) the real heart of this mighty city – the tens of thousands of young men, the mechanics, the writers, &c, &c. In all of them burns, almost with fierceness, the divine fire which more or less, during all ages, has only waited a chance to leap forth and confound the calculations of tyrants, hunkers, and all their tribe. At this moment, New York is the most radical city in America.¹³⁵

Tight Irish community ties and radical views drew young men into club activities and politics: men like John Morrissey during his early years in New York City. Morrissey, a dyed in the wool Irish ruffian who had gained a criminal record and street fighting background growing up in an upstate Troy, had moved to the big city while still a teenager in 1849 and quickly fell in with the Empire Club and Isaiah Rynders. Morrissey worked as an immigrant runner for the club

¹³³ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 97-102.

¹³⁴ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 274.

¹³⁵ Hunkers were Democrats so named because they "hunkered" down on the issue of slavery. Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 389.

at the docks, greeting the new Irish arrivals and directing them to kitchens and boarding houses. In exchange the immigrant declared their eligibility to vote and pledged support to the political organisation their runner represented. On election days, runners enforced these pledges, potentially under the threat of violence. The use of charity followed by exploitation led to runners being referred to as parasites, though Morrissey earned a reputation as a tough but fair enforcer. His own Irish background and impoverished upbringing undoubtedly struck a chord with the ruffian when he saw the hordes of Irish exports disembark, fighting starvation and disease, yet seeking hope for a better future. Furthermore, the legitimate immigrant runner was far less a parasite than the con artists and land sharks preying upon other immigrant new arrivals.¹³⁶

Democratic nominations were deliberately held in saloons or sometimes in brothels, home turf for radicals, to intimidate “respectable classes” from voting or even attending party caucuses. Votes could be bought with a speech, a drink, or simply with cash. Mike Walsh revelled in this fact, enthusiastically telling his *Subterranean* readers in 1845, “This is truly the season of caucuses. Every grog shop, oyster box, barber shop, alley and charcoal wagon is the scene of a caucus after dark.”¹³⁷ For the Democratic Party, as one might expect, this created a number of problems to go with the party’s new political clout. A small force of firehouse roughs could hijack any meeting or ballot box if deployed effectively, but instilling discipline and curbing the extremism of the shirtless factions was all but impossible. All that could be generally

¹³⁶ The story of Morrissey and Rynders’ first meeting has the former wander into the Empire club and announce, “I’m here to say I can lick any man here.” A brawl and a beating later, during which the young Morrissey impressed the Captain with his resiliency, Morrissey was bunking in the club house and working for Empire at the docks. English, *Paddy Whacked*, 13-15.

¹³⁷ *Subterranean*, October 4th, 1845.

relied upon was support for the party on election days. On a daily basis, the factions controlled the streets.¹³⁸

Election days themselves were studies in organised chaos, which made the gangs indispensable to get anything done, and for a politician invaluable to have the right gang on their side. Almost every November, crowds of men in heavy coats and tall hats, bolstered by the liquid courage offered in saloons, would push, stampede, brawl and sometimes even riot in the name of partisanship, activities they referred to as “election sports.” Speakers in booths set up directly outside the polling stations handed out ballots. They also shouted last minute urges to vote for their preferred candidates to the line of hundreds winding the streets before them, while enduring harassment and loud rebuttals from dissidents in the crowd.¹³⁹

A nineteenth-century author’s encounter with Rynders, “that prince of roughs and shoulder strikers who so long held New York in terror,” describes how the Empire Club’s electioneering process worked. Rynders and other political leaders would move between precincts giving orders to their lieutenants based on how to best carry each ward:

In one *terror* would keep from the polls a sufficient number of timid Whigs. In another, *stuffing the ballot-boxes* was feasible. A third could be best carried by practicing the rule prescribed by one of their authorities, viz. ‘Vote early, vote late, *and vote often!*’

Rynders himself preferred the first option. In one instance he stood up before a crowd of one thousand in a hotly contested Whig district and yelled out “*I am Isaiah Rynders! My club is here, scattered among you! We know you! Five hundred of you are from Philadelphia – brought here to vote the Whig ticket! Damn you! [I]f you don’t leave these polls in five minutes, we will dirk*

¹³⁸ Adams, *Bowery Boys*, 11-12, xxi.

¹³⁹ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 141.

every mother's son of you!” Within five minutes the crowd of peaceable citizens halved, the voters dissipating without casting a ballot for fear of assassination.¹⁴⁰

For the victorious faction, achieving the desired candidate's election secured not only political power, but substantial patronage funds. An alderman or Common Council member in New York City had access to \$1.5 million in patronage each year by 1840, a number which increased annually as the city expanded. Corrupt elected leaders could, and frequently did, ignore the responsibilities and budget of their position to simultaneously fill their own pockets while rewarding the political bands that helped them into office with sinecures.¹⁴¹

Antebellum gangs were always primarily motivated by politics, with few exceptions. Minor scuffles could and did occur, mostly between the Irish, and carried the potential for escalation, but all major riots had political underpinnings and a degree of deliberate social organisation to set them off. This is exactly what caused the 1849 Astor House Riot, New York City's largest episode of collective violence in the antebellum era. The riot was motivated on one front by general Irish hostility towards Britain, and by lower Manhattan's resentment for the Anglophile upper classes of Broadway on the other, all viewed through the prism of a Shakespearean acting rivalry between American Edwin Forrest and Englishman William Charles Macready. On May 10th, 1849, Rynders purchased tickets for dozens of Empire Club men and placed them in the crowd at the lavish Astor Place Theatre, just off Broadway, to harass Macready during his performance of *Macbeth*. He also passed out provocative handbills asking “Shall Americans or English rule this city?” in saloons across New York, and drew a crowd of up to ten thousand rowdies outside the theatre, which was guarded by police and state militia for

¹⁴⁰ ‘Vote early, vote late, *and vote often!*’ was reportedly one of Mike Walsh's favourite phrases. Sherlock Bristol, *The Pioneer Preacher: Incidents of Interest, and Experiences in the Author's Life* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1887), 127-129.

¹⁴¹ Adams, *Bowery Boys*, 12-13.

attempting to keep the peace. The rowdies violently clashed with the guards, resulting in “thirty six hours of civic warfare.”¹⁴² For the first time in American history, government forces fired upon a crowd, killing twenty to thirty rioters, seven of them Irish-American, and injuring well over a hundred. The riot’s magnitude and severity, in addition to the inability of the city to contain the lawlessness, foreshadowed the Bowery Boys Riot in 1857 and eventually the Draft Riot in 1863. The gangs and their leaders excelled at creating and perpetuating chaos.¹⁴³

After the events at Astor in 1849, *The Nation*, published by Thomas D’Arcy McGee, appealed to his fellow Irishmen to avoid the gang partisans and maintain their political independence. Irishmen ought to avoid the “second-rate demagogues” like Rynders and other gang leaders that held political meetings in taverns and fire halls. McGee claimed the gangs were exploiting the community to create mob rule and secure votes. Further, he went on, “These men, mostly of Irish origin, flattered them on election days, and despised them all other days; appealed to their passions and their bigotries; encouraged their weaknesses and vices.” The *Irish-American* quickly returned fire, calling the charges “a coarse, vulgar, beastly lie, not having a shadow of truth to bear it out.”¹⁴⁴ Of course, everything McGee asserted has been true, save for the most important factor. Five Points was not being exploited. Men like Rynders, whether they knew it or not, existed and thrived by the will of the community. Rioting was an expression of the community’s voice, and the larger the riot, the greater the expression. Ultimately, the free market taught this lesson to McGee the hard way. The *Nation* failed to garner much readership or

¹⁴² Mary P. Ryan, *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City During the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California, 1997), 136.

¹⁴³ Burrows, Edwin G., and Wallace, Mike. *Gotham: A History of New York to 1898* (New York: Oxford University, 1999), 761-766; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 166; Ryan, *Civic Wars*, 136-137; Adams, *Bowery Boys*, 40-44.

¹⁴⁴ *The Nation* and *Irish-American* quoted in Florence E. Gibson, *The Attitudes of the New York Irish toward State and National Affairs, 1848-1892* (New York: AMS Press, 1968 [1951]), 28-29.

support, folded soon after this exchange with the *Irish-American*, and McGee left New York City.¹⁴⁵

Relationship between the Police and Gangs

New York City's antebellum police were either in league with the gangs, sympathetic to their cause, or too afraid to intervene. The frequent complaints filed against men like Walsh and Rynders would go to the city Democrats, where numerous tactics forwent any real punishment. Rowdies were dismissed without any bail or fines, and cases could be indefinitely shuffled away from trial. Over three months in 1852 alone, more than one hundred gang members were set free by partisan aldermen. Ward-level politicians in New York regularly gave bribes or promotions to policemen for turning a blind eye to gang activities, if not aiding in ballot destruction and voter intimidation. In 1840, the state legislature found that some officers earned thousands of dollars per year in bribes drawn from the city treasury. The same alderman who paid out bribes also controlled police appointments, creating a circle of fraud for monetary and political gain. Police patronage was in fact one of the most effective means for ruling political clubs to profit and exert their influence, and a policeman's job was heavily tied to the fate of his appointing party in elections.¹⁴⁶

Political connections were not the only hindrance to true justice under the law. Many policemen demanded prepaid rewards to search for stolen property. Brothels often paid off policemen between fifty and one hundred dollars a month under threat of indictment or arrest. In an era when most patronage posts were earned through party loyalty or bribes, it should be no

¹⁴⁵ Ibid; Barnet Schecter, *The Devil's Own Work: The Civil War Draft Riots and the Fight to Reconstruct America* (New York: Walker & Company, 2005), 53.

¹⁴⁶ Posts on the police force prior to 1857 were allotted by city Alderman and the mayor under the ruling municipal office. Adams, *Bowery Boys*, 12-14; James F. Richardson, *New York Police: Colonial Times to 1901* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 55-56.

surprise that police department corruption was rampant. The *New York Herald* in 1843 warned that the combined efforts of the police, clubs like Tammany, and the radicals themselves, “threatened to turn the art of government into the rule of the strong armed tough... violence of the ruffians and government of the mob is supreme.” Though contemporaries diagnosed the problem successfully, achieving reform was another matter entirely. New York City’s police force in the 1840s and early 1850s was largely composed of Irish and German men raised in the same lower Manhattan neighbourhoods that moralists and the affluent wished to reform. Enforcing saloon liquor licenses, breaking up gambling dens, or raiding the meeting halls of political clubs seemed repugnant to men who saw these areas as pillars for community strength and agency. Illegal saloons, gambling, and even prostitution were therefore allowed to exist out in the open on the streets of Five Points and the Bowery. Collusion between underworld figures and policemen, many of whom were gangsters themselves, was common. Since officers were mainly compensated by finder’s fees, even after meagre salaries had been introduced, a policeman was far more interested in the most lucrative duties of his position than any other.¹⁴⁷

In cases of stolen property, for example, returning the goods proffered a greater financial reward than arresting the criminal. Officers thus proffered numerous deals with criminal associates. In some cases the thief, if caught, could simply turn over the stolen goods in exchange for their freedom. Corrupt policeman rationalised lining their own pockets in this way by arguing the returned goods would have simply been sold, then the proceeds used by the criminal to hire a lawyer. Another variation of this graft involved the officer’s complicity in the

¹⁴⁷ Bristol’s primary source tales sometimes verge into the patently ridiculous, including fighting with Rynders himself in front of the Plug Uglies (a gang Rynders did not lead), and claiming to have prevented him through shaming from ever leading another riot, which he certainly did right up until a much better documented and more public embarrassment in 1857. This reference is included here due to substantiation from other sources, such as the Democratic pardons Mike Walsh and George Wilkes received in jail. Bristol, *Pioneer Preacher*, 129; Ernst, *Immigrant Life*, 128-129; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 228.

original theft. The stolen goods would be returned to the owner for a large reward, a portion of which the officer gave to the thief as his share.¹⁴⁸ Since this competitive reward system discouraged collaboration between officers, each policeman frequently had their own group of criminal informants and associates. Both the New York Common Council and Horace Greeley agreed that the city struggled with an inefficient force, less interested in preventing crime than benefiting from the rewards of it.¹⁴⁹ Any effective reform would need to come from outside New York City, and as chapter three will illustrate, police reform struggled to address engrained political corruption.

Communal Justifications for Extralegal Resistance

For the Five Points Irish, forming or joining a gang was not discouraged by community stigma. In fact, given Irish pre-immigration experiences with legally enforced colonial oppression, in some ways the community encouraged radical resistance. Gangsters were recognised along the lines of modern day extra-legal activists; that is, political rowdies were hardly universally approved of, but there existed an understanding that radicals often fought for the rights of their respective communities. Gangs were not formed as criminal organisations in this era, but as political organisations willing to break the law for what they believed in.¹⁵⁰

Ideas of extralegal resistance to injustice were becoming well articulated as the abolition movement grew over several decades since the 1830s to the boiling point of a national crisis.

Henry David Thoreau's 1849 essay *Civil Disobedience*, still referenced today by activists, was

¹⁴⁸ Numerous police reports found in 1840s New York newspapers describe just these scenarios, including the *New York Herald*, December 25th, 1842, and *New York Tribune*, December 5th, 1842; *Sun* (New York), March 20th, 31st, 1843; Richardson, *New York Police*, 295. Richardson also lists the *New York Evening Tattler*, August 30th 1841, however this source could not be found and verified independently for this study.

¹⁴⁹ "The City Police," *New York Tribune*, December 5th 1842, 1; Richardson, *New York Police*, viii-ix, 30-31.

¹⁵⁰ English, *Paddy Whacked*, 18.

written in part because Thoreau took particular issue with the Fugitive Slave Act. He reasoned that if one believes the laws imposed upon them to be truly wrong, unconstitutional, or damaging to the people's agency, then one is not just allowed, but in fact morally obligated, to conscientiously break the law. More, Thoreau advocated breaking away from the practices of passivity and embracing the potential to conscientiously sacrifice one's very existence.¹⁵¹

Thoreau's own words to open *Civil Disobedience* were "I heartily accept the motto, - 'That government is best which governs least'; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically." This echoed a similar quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson, the champion of individualism and transcendentalism, in the 1844 essay *Politics*, "Hence the less government we have the better—the fewer laws and the less confided power." Emerson tells his contemporaries to remember, "The law is just a memorandum." His ideal state advocated for the growth of the individual until their traits of compassion, empathy, love and wisdom were strong enough to dissolve the state altogether. For Emerson, the individual mind superseded all else since "every actual state is corrupt," or at least this is how Thoreau and his followers interpreted the subtleties of his prose.¹⁵²

Civil Disobedience does not specifically advocate violence, but neither does it lay out a pacifist ideology. Thoreau contended that government is not prone to corruption, but it is the source of injustice in society. Neither does the rule of law advance justice in society. An individual, when driven by their conscience, is not morally inferior to the will of the majority or

¹⁵¹ While referring to the south Thoreau stated: "This people must cease to hold slaves, and to make war on Mexico, though it cost them their existence as a people." Later influential figures and movements, including Mahatma Gandhi, anti-McCarthy campaigns, Martin Luther King Junior, and anti-Vietnam war protesters have all referenced the essay as part of their inspiration for civil disobedience, although in the form of peaceful non-resistance. Henry David Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience: Resistance to Civil Government* [1849] (Auckland, NZ: The Floating Press, 2008), 16-17, 9-10, 20.

¹⁵² David Leverenz, "The Politics of Emerson's Man-Making Words," *PMLA* 101.1 (January 1986), 38, 43, 54n; Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Politics*, 1844, accessed Feb 14, 2013, <http://www.panarchy.org/emerson/politics.1844.html>; Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, 16.

the law, and it “is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume, is to do at any time what I think is right.”¹⁵³

Though Thoreau’s direct message was a revolt against the war with Mexico and the continuation of slavery, shirtless Democrats were happy to apply his moral cost-benefit analysis for direct action to local acts and laws like the police and temperance acts, unequal hiring practices, soaring rents costs, and the politicians advocating them.¹⁵⁴

Irish-Americans had many reasons to be discontent with their New York City surroundings, and find inspiration in Emerson’s *Politics* or Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience*. On May 2nd, 1857, for instance, the *Irish-American* boldly responded to a slanderous article by the *New York Times* which asserted that the presence of the Irish uptown would ruin Central Park. “The Central Park was intended not as a luxurious promenade for the rich,” The *Irish-American* argued, “but as the ‘lungs of the city’ for the working classes, as well as for those who are in easy and favoured circumstances.” Themes of a class clash and aristocratic grievance continued, and through the discussion over Central Park, the *Irish-American* espoused the discontent which led to gang formation:

But really, when we find a paper like the *Times* – a paper we once admired for qualities to which it can no longer lay claim – talking up and patronising a sham aristocracy, a wealthy corporation of snobs, - an aristocracy compounded on monies fraudulently obtained by gambling in stocks, by failures of trade, and robbing of creditors; by Schuylerism and Huntingtonism; by every possible dishonest practice of lottery offices, note-shaving, and Peter Funkism; by worthless, or worse than worthless, patent medicines and quack nostrums; when we find, we say, a New York Radical Republican daily paper preaching the exhalation of such as class over the heads and to the debasement of the honest and industrious and virtuous operative classes of this Metropolis, we must denounce such as outrage, and call it by its proper name, a piece of contemptible, insolent, and vulgar arrogance. An Aristocracy!¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience* 4, 6.

¹⁵⁴ See, for instance, the story of “Fatty” Walsh (not to be confused with Mike Walsh) during the 1857 Bowery Boys Riot, inciting further violence in defence of his community. Anbinder, *Five Points*, 269-271.

¹⁵⁵ *Irish-American*, May 2nd, 1857, 4.

This quote could, with cosmetic modifications, be attributed to the modern Occupy movement. It is clear that papers like the *Irish-American*, and the rhetoric used by political radicals such as the incendiary handbills passed out by the Empire club before the Astor Riot, framed the struggle for lower Manhattan's upward mobility in terms of class warfare, righteously fighting against snobbery and corruption.

Subversive and violent practices were not new to the Irish in America. In fact, the traditions and hierarchies of resistance were, like the neighbourhoods themselves, transplanted from rural Ireland to the urban United States. The Irish had for centuries fought British hegemony in Ireland with sporadic acts of terror, though resistance had undoubtedly been beaten down into something very informal by the time of famine. Any subversive organisations that existed in Ireland during the first half of the nineteenth century existed on a clandestine and local level.¹⁵⁶ These local acts were not inspired by lofty aims or highly developed political philosophies, though the idea of Irish emancipation from Britain was persistent, but were in direct response to specific local grievances. The most popular crimes of rebellion were assault, arson, and the destruction of property. Murders were rarer, but certainly did occur.¹⁵⁷ The early immigration generations of Irish were accustomed to living in a culture that accepted a place in society for violence and brutality. At its most romanticised, direct and violent action in resistance to the law or the ruling classes was viewed as heroic. This perspective survived with the rest of Irish culture in the cities of America, and was expressed through gang titles and actions. A young Irishman in antebellum New York City who becomes interested in politics and was already accustomed to violence was instantly a zealot, and a force to be reckoned with.

¹⁵⁶ The British had consistently and savagely quelled any and all rebellions over the past several centuries. Shannon, *American Irish*, 17; English, *Paddy Whacked*, 3.

¹⁵⁷ Shannon, *American Irish*, 17-18.

In the United States, violence has always been a well documented part of American culture. The United States of America was born in the violence of the American Revolution and saw a steady increase in the frequency and severity of mob action throughout the Jacksonian and Antebellum eras. Each of these actions was part of American society's consistently violent struggle to evolve as a nation. In lower Manhattan during the 1850s, this struggle was towards modernity, and given the levels of scholarship pointing to American society as continually and inherently violent, the riots of this period should perhaps be less surprising. Historian Seymour Martin Lipset points to America's revolutionary birth and tradition as a cultural identity, particularly in comparison to Canada's counter-revolutionary tradition and as a way to explain the violence gap between the two nations. The United States has always seen cause for celebration of the overthrow of oppression, the people's triumph, and the creation of a new and never before seen government.¹⁵⁸ Shocking levels of high profile violence in 1960s America, including the Vietnam War, a glut of assassinations including two Kennedys and Martin Luther King, mass protest, and a rise in inner-city disorder forcibly shattered any illusions of American exceptionalism from violence, inspiring President Lyndon B. Johnson to appoint three commissions investigating the waves of turmoil. Testifying to the Kerner Commission, activist, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) chair, and ally of the Black Panther Party H. Rap Brown stated,

Look here, illegal, collective violence is so much a part of our culture, so much used by virtually all interest groups, including the government from time to time, that it has become reinforced in our society, and it is high time we faced up to this fact and quit fooling ourselves.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Seymour Martin Lipset, *Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 1-16.

¹⁵⁹ Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Gurr, *The History of Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives – A report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence* (New York: Praeger, 1969), xvi.

The reports of the commissions, and academics still influential today both agreed with Brown. Historian Richard Maxwell Brown used the findings of the commissions to fundamentally re-conceive American co-operative violence as a defining part of American society, where “American life has been characterised by continuous and often intense violence,” forming a “seamless web with some of the most positive events in American History.”¹⁶⁰ Fellow historian Richard Hofstadter, among others, re-explored mob action in American history, arguing that violence could be a successful, practical and political tool if combined with public support, expressed for a limited duration, and on a limited scale.¹⁶¹

Therefore, the episodes of violence discussed in this thesis, though substantial, should not be regarded as exceptional or unique to antebellum New York City. Studies like those mentioned above found similar outbreaks of violence across antebellum America, from Boston to Baltimore to San Francisco, and certainly in the American South. Every single region of the United States saw instances of rough justice enacted by large groups with the consent of the community in spite of the law.¹⁶² In fact, aside from spikes in 1849, 1857, and 1863, the years of major riots, New York City murder rates in this era were fewer than thirty per year, lower than the national average, and Northern fatalities were one-eighth of those in the slave South.¹⁶³ New York City’s antebellum mob violence was part of a nationwide trend, an accepted part of the nation’s struggle for change. The summer of 1857, the focus of the following chapter, did not witness the first, last, or even largest riots in American history.

¹⁶⁰ Richard Maxwell Brown, *Strain of Violence: Historiographical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 48.

¹⁶¹ Survey studies of mob action included: Richard Maxwell Brown, ed., *American Violence* (Englewood, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), Adrian Cook, *The Armies of the Streets* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974), Feldberg, *The Turbulent Era*; Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace, *American Violence: A Documentary History* (New York: Knopf, 1970).

¹⁶² Elizabeth Dale, *Criminal Justice in the United States, 1789-1939* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University, 2011), 46-47.

¹⁶³ Anbinder, *Five Points*, 70; David Grimstead, *American Mobbing, 1828-1861: Toward Civil War* (New York: Oxford University, 1998), 13, 86.

Still, a number of factors make the study of violence in New York City during the antebellum era unique and interesting. The Bowery B'hoy subculture and Shirtless Democracy were fleeting yet powerful movements. America in general and New York in particular was in a state of flux, part of an ongoing struggle towards modernity. The gangs garnered enough influence and attention that they became part of a Democratic Party government's approach to rule, and a Republican Party's stumbling block requiring removal. Antebellum New York City was a microcosm of the nation's struggles between community cultural values and the government's need for progress in the rule of law.

Anti-Irish Sentiment

New York City's colourful, boisterous, violent, and powerful new antebellum subculture naturally drew spirited reactions from many. Sensationalised media and reformer reports made upper-class Americans regard all Five Pointers as immoral. The district's popular leisure activities made it hard to argue. Firefighters brawled in public, saloons housed alcoholics, gamblers, illegal pugilism and political radicals, and as a voting bloc the Sixth Ward elected the most extreme radicals in America. As a result, New York's Irish-American community experienced pronounced examples of racially-motivated backlash. Irish Five Pointer Joseph Brennan wrote home to Dublin in 1851 and described his community's status as "one of shame and poverty. They are shamed and despised....Ireland is as much a subject of contempt as of pity. 'My master is a great tyrant,' said a negro lady, 'he treats me as badly as if I was a *common Irishman*.'"¹⁶⁴ Just as Irish community traditions survived the famine, so too did anti-Irish racism and prejudice.

¹⁶⁴ Gibson, *Attitudes of the New York Irish*, 15.

Outpourings of compassion for Irish suffering during the famine faded with the continuing influx of the Irish immigrant horde and the rise of Irish-American political bands. Rising nativist thought was both a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant response to the increased Irish-American occupational and political presence in New York City, and also a reactionary response to difficult labour conditions. Data suggests no group suffered more during the famine decade of Irish immigration than native-born urban labourers. Over this time, New York City's wealth gap between skilled and unskilled workers increased substantially. Industrialising production methods raised the employability of unskilled labour, but mass Irish immigration only accelerated the transition to a lower grade of labour as the new standard, which downgraded many skilled and artisan native workers. Large New York factories were not particular about who worked for them, employing immigrants right off the ships. Furniture making for instance transformed from an artisan to a sweated contract trade, and a journeyman working under a large furniture manufacturer had his wage reduced from fifteen dollars a week to only eight from 1836 to 1846. Even as wages stabilised in the decade before the Civil War, they did not rise to meet inflation, and real wages therefore continued to fall. In reality, the negative effects of workforce transitions were an inevitable part of America's ongoing industrialisation. Working-class advocates pointed out that the greatest proportion of immigrant labour was on major projects and infrastructure, which did not displace skilled artisans. For Nativists, however, the Irish as a publicly different and highly insular community were a convenient group to blame for the growing pains of modernisation.¹⁶⁵

Discontent over health and shifting voting blocs were also factors. For the first half of the 1850s, death rates for Irish-Americans in New York were only sixty percent of the native-born

¹⁶⁵ Ferrie, *Yankees Now*, 187; Adams, *Bowery Boys*, 32.

working-class, despite living in some of the city's worst conditions.¹⁶⁶ Part of the reason native-born New Yorkers suffered in comparison to the Irish community was the aforementioned informal Five Points safety net. Native-born New Yorkers witnessed and resented their own position weakening due to Irish immigration and culture. WASP leadership of Tammany Hall was no longer secure in the 1840s, and the legitimate Irish voting bloc was over one-third of the city by 1850 even before underworld electioneering was taken into consideration. Just as Irish immigration began to taper off from its peak over the 1850s, German immigration rose to replace it.¹⁶⁷ New York City's native-born power base was indeed eroding.

The Irish proletariat were targeted for their apparent "inferiority" by other classes and cultures in the United States based upon stereotypes carried across the Atlantic. Social and economic deprivations in Ireland and America caused many to regard Irish-Americans as naturally inferior. Poverty was deemed the fault of the individual, and disease in turn was associated with both poverty and race. Irish in Five Points were blamed racially for the cause and spread of disease in New York due the squalid slum conditions and the visibly poor health immigrants arrived in. Cultural isolationism only worsened perceptions. By retaining many traditional customs, the Irish-American urban poor were considered a threat to the "American" way of life. Criminal statistics did not help matters. Out of 27,000 criminal convictions across the United States in 1850, over half of the convicted were foreign born. The Irish dominated American criminal statistics for arrest, imprisonment, confinement in poorhouses, and mental institutions. Over the 1850s, five times more members of the Irish-American community received New York criminal convictions than Germans or WASPs. The infamous New York Halls of Justice and House of Detention, better known as the Tombs prison, also sat on Centre

¹⁶⁶ Doyle, "Remaking of Irish America," 231.

¹⁶⁷ Marjorie R. Fallows, *Irish Americans: Identity and Assimilation* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1979), 31-34.

Street, only two blocks northwest of Five Points, a symbol and visual reminder for many of the neighbourhood's vice and crime.¹⁶⁸

Common to most antagonistic sentiment towards a perceived "other" is a process of dehumanisation. At the most basic level, native-born attitudes toward the Irish were primitive racism. The mythology of an Irish savage consisted of several tropes, similar to African American stereotypes like the "Uncle Tom" and "Sambo," if less extreme. At the peak, a Protestant Irish farmer was regarded to be entirely respectable. The first level of prejudice was the dimwitted but harmless "Mick" who spoke in banter illogical to WASPs; the second was the potentially dangerous "Pat" with a protruding mouth and jaw; last came the "Paddy," more simian than *homo sapien*, described by historian Kevin Kenny as, "like a cross between monstrous ape and primitive man, owing to his high and hairy upper lip or muzzle, concave nose, low facial angle, and sharp teeth."¹⁶⁹ Even prior to Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, the idea of an inferiority written into one's phenotype, manifesting itself through acts of savagery, was subjected upon the Irish due to their history of collective violence. Discrimination was supported by contemporary physiognomy, a pseudo-science which believed facial characteristics and other physical features gave insight into the morality of an individual or entire population.¹⁷⁰

Numerous influential figures either accepted or drove anti-Irish attitudes. Iconic cartoonist Thomas Nast, later credited with turning public opinion against Tammany Boss William Tweed, had once applauded America's ability to take in the desperate Irish. However, once the strains of economic downturn left many looking for someone to blame, Nast began

¹⁶⁸ Factors behind these statistics, including police corruption and harassment, are untenable but certainly not insignificant. We do know that most arrests stemmed from want or drink, but fighting was not uncommon. Brighton, *Irish Diaspora*, 157; Adams, *Bowery Boys*, 33; Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 320; Kenny, "Anti-Irish Sentiment," 367.

¹⁶⁹ Kenny, "Anti-Irish Sentiment," 364.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 364-365.

caricaturising the Irish as nearly simian, slovenly creatures with plug noses. These Irish were another part of the “white man’s burden” in America. Lawyer George Templeton Strong and single term Mayor Phillip Hone, contemporary members of New York high society, both expressed anti-Irish views in their respective diaries. Strong describes the Irish as subhuman “sons of toil with prehensile paws,” and a build suited to physical labour. Less racially motivated but no more accepting, Hone portrays the same group “as strangers among us,” but loath as he was to admit, the Irish “decide the elections in the city of New York.”¹⁷¹

The Know Nothings and the Irish

In an official and legal capacity, Nativists at their worst only attempted, unsuccessfully, to stem immigration by extending the required time period before naturalisation. The effect Nativism actually had on the Irish was also very limited, particularly given the spectrum for racism in the United States.¹⁷² More substantial opposition to immigrants appeared extralegally via a xenophobic group named the Know Nothings. The Know Nothing, sometimes called the American Party movement, began in early 1850s Pennsylvania as a secret criminal anti-immigrant organisation, and spread across the Eastern United States as Irish immigrants became a prominent urban minority. Like their Irish counterparts, Know Nothings disrupted and influenced elections, but also burned down a number of Catholic churches and murdered immigrant leaders. Their name derived from the response members gave when asked about the

¹⁷¹ The degradation of Irish imagery in Nast’s cartoons had been foreshadowed by the early nineteenth century prose and cartoon rhetoric in Britain, including the eventual portrayal of the Irish poor as simians. George Templeton Strong, *The Diary of George Templeton Strong: Volume 1* (New York: Macmillan, 1852), 318; Philip Hone, *The Diary of Philip Hone: Volume 1* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1889), 184; Adams, *Bowery Boys*, 33; Kenny, “Anti-Irish Sentiment,” 367-369.

¹⁷² Given the spectrum for racism in the United States, political attacks against the Irish were actually comparatively tame. Nothing comparable to the early twentieth century’s immigration restrictions against Far East minorities was even suggested, and of course no real comparison can be made to the plight of African-American slaves. Ferrie, *Yankeys Now*, 183; Kenny “Anti-Irish Sentiment,” 376.

club: “I know nothing.” Truly a single issue party of “No,” the official Know Nothing charter lists among their bedrock principles “anti-Romanism, anti-Bedinism, anti-Papistalism, anti-Nunneryism, anti-Winking Virginiaism, and anti-Jesuitism.”¹⁷³

Ned Bluntline, a Bowery Boy companion to Isaiah Rynders, was a New York City Know Nothing founder in 1853 after supporting Nativist movements during the 1840s. A writer, Bluntline was actually the chosen pen name of Edward Z. C. Johnson, born in Harpersfield, New York. Under this moniker, he sympathised with native-born poverty in the New York working class, publishing a novel, *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, in 1848, and running his own newspaper serial, *Bluntline’s Own*. His sympathies were reserved only to native-born artisans and workers, and extralegally Bluntline was a virulent anti-Catholic. *Mysteries and Miseries* referred to Irish grog-shop keepers as their own best customers, discussed the advantages owed to an Englishman by birthright, tells a story about a thieving Irish carriage driver, and describes Irish workers as, “a saucy, cheating, good for nothing set of scoundrels.”¹⁷⁴

Extreme Nativists like Bluntline were outraged by rampant urban poverty and the decline of artisanship during industrialisation. Like the Irish politicians, Know Nothings blamed the state of the working classes on the greed American elites. However, they also held Irish immigrants responsible for flooding the labour market while the apprenticeship system simultaneously fell apart. His proposed solution, which appealed to many native-born workers in the higher paid trades such as butchers, printers, and carpenters, was to resist industrialisation and the continuing

¹⁷³ English, *Paddy Whacked*, 23-24.

¹⁷⁴ *Bluntline’s Own* particularly sympathised with exploited sewing girls toiling in local sweat shops. Bluntline threatened to expose the names of any shop paying the young girls six cents or less an item in the *Tribune*. Ned Bluntline, *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York: A Story of Real Life* (New York: W.F. Burgess, 1849), 59, 391; Adams, *Bowery Boys*, 30. *Bluntline’s Own* particularly sympathised with exploited sewing girls toiling in local sweat shops. Bluntline threatened to expose the names of any shop paying the young girls six cents or less an item in the *Tribune*.

influx of unskilled immigrant labour by any and all means. In addition to the perceived labour competition, the Roman Catholic Church was targeted as a pagan, foreign menace. Know Nothings felt themselves to be activists in a movement of “American purification.” Mike Walsh defended immigrants, calling the Know Nothing groups “the most illiberal branch of stupidity,” whose anti-immigration argument was “a ridiculous panacea of these poor deluded quacks,” which “stupidly lay[s] all the blame on immigrants for low wages and high rents.”¹⁷⁵

The Irish were sometimes their own worst enemies at drawing Nativist fervour. In 1850, Catholic Archbishop John Hughes of New York made a public address containing numerous imprudent statements Know Nothings pointed to as justification for xenophobia. Hughes’ sermon, widely republished as *The Decline of Protestantism and Its Causes*, described a Nativist’s nightmare:

The object we hope to accomplish is to control all Pagan nations, and all Protestant nations.... There is no secrecy in this.... Our mission [is] to convert the world – including the inhabitants of the United States – the people of the cities, the people of the country... the Legislature, the Senate, the Cabinet, the President, and all!

In closing remarks, Hughes also decreed that Protestantism was on its deathbed, “its last moment is come when it is fairly set, face to face, with Catholic truth.” It seems almost understandable for xenophobes to imagine an international Catholic conspiracy when encountering such phrases.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ Among other conspiracy theories, Bluntline personally believed Catholic immigrants were conspiring with factory owners, with the goal of destroying American republicanism in favour of ultra-Montaigne fealty. English, *Paddy Whacked*, 24; Adams, *Bowery Boys*, 30. For details of the economic conditions in New York City feeding the Know Nothing movement, see Gorn, “True American,” 392-394.

¹⁷⁶ On the other side of the extreme, Nativism’s most popular publication was Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures*, published in 1836. Monk, a Canadian, presented the text as an autobiography for her upbringing in a Catholic convent wherein she and others were sexually exploited. The anti-Catholic narrative was proven fictional through a number of investigations, including the testimony of Monk’s own mother, and was probably ghostwritten by the girl’s Nativist handlers at an asylum. Monk herself turned to prostitution, dying penniless and imprisoned on Blackwell’s Island in 1849, but the work nevertheless gained great readership and attention. Historian Richard Hofstadter described *Awful Disclosures* as the “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” for the Know Nothing Movement, and it even

After the Whig party split and quickly collapsed in the early 1850s, Know-Nothings gained sweeping victories in the 1854 and 1855 elections throughout New England. Almost seventy-five Know-Nothings were elected to a State or Federal public office. The political and physical threats to urban Irish-Americans were real, and for a short period Know Nothings posed direct challenges to the Irish in public office and on the street. Appealing to ethnic hatreds in difficult times succeeded politically because it preached rampant nationalism while side-stepping real platforms or issues, a variant of the exact same tactic Irish politicians used in electioneering. Protestant evangelicals that preached morality and true piety were impossible for Catholics; artisans bemoaned the lost spirit of mutual collaborative improvement in the face of insular immigrant communities; labourers demanded protection against the Irish stealing their jobs; underworld attacks became increasingly framed by race. Perceptions of the Irish as a common enemy tied each group together. New York City's Irish radicals were already using politics to satisfy their ambitions, gain jobs, and to generally protect and empower their community. The Know Nothing Party was a blowback against Irish political and community success: an imitation of Irish-American radicalism turned around against the Irish themselves.¹⁷⁷

Considering the value systems of the gangs, the nature of their social activities, and the population density of lower Manhattan, head butting between factions was inevitable. Brawling in New York was a particularly dangerous and deadly affair. In Ireland, fighting clubs followed *Shillelagh* (pronounced she-lay-la) combat laws, a system of gentlemanly trial by combat similar

reappeared in circulation for the 1960 election to sully John F. Kennedy's Catholicism. James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University, 1988), 132; Shannon, *American Irish*, 43.

¹⁷⁷ As an example of Nativism in the underworld, one New York City Bowery Boy and Know Nothing leader, William Poole (better known as Bill the Butcher), repeatedly harassed Welsh-American police patrolman and Tammany immigrant runner Lew Baker. Poole was paid to attack and beat two of Baker's friends, and publicly threatened Baker with death and dismemberment. Lew Baker had actually been an old drinking companion of Poole's before their rivalries, showing that the Know Nothings often used race as a convenient expression for dissatisfaction, rather than the cause for quarrel. *New York Times*, "Stanwix Hall Tragedy," December 3rd, 4th, 6th, 7th, 1855; Shannon, *Irish American*, 45-46; Gorn, "True American," 397-398, 402.

to an American pistol dual.¹⁷⁸ In lower New York City, where any and all “aristocratic” traditions were rejected, there was nothing gentlemanly about a brawl. Whether individual contests or full scale gang wars, the action was without rules, shockingly brutal, and could last for days. One Five Pointer’s letter to a friend in Ireland claimed, “The people here can far beat your country killing one another,” since “The people here think as little of killing you as you would of killing the mice in a cornstock.... If you ever get into a fight here you must either kill or be killed.” The letter notes that instead of fists or the Irish club, brawlers in his area utilised pistols and large knives. Though still a rare crime, the amount of murders did raise dramatically during the height of Know Nothing and Irish gang tensions. More New Yorkers were convicted of murder between 1852 and 1854 than in the entire 1840s.¹⁷⁹

Ultimately, a party based on open and blatant prejudice, letting hatred stand in the way of progress, and representing an ever-shrinking and narrow minded percentage of the population, was doomed to fail. The Know-Nothings were a transitional party, peaking just as the Whigs met their end, the Republicans began their rise, and the Democrats struggled in factions amongst themselves. On the national stage, the single issue party passed little real legislation, greatly embarrassed themselves with witch hunts in Massachusetts, and temporarily diverted attentions away from the larger issue of slavery. In New York City, Irish rowdies stood their ground, defended their communities, and retained elements of their Irish identity in the face of resistance. Few institutions were better prepared to meet violence with violence than New York’s immigrant gangs, who were reinforced by new arrivals weekly. By the 1860s the Know Nothing faction was

¹⁷⁸ Irish combat laws were named after the country’s popular weapon of choice. A shillelagh was a cross between a wooden walking stick and a club, featuring a knobbed cudgel at one end often weighted with molten lead and sometimes attached to the wrist with a leather strap. For more on Shillelagh law, culture, and fighting, see John W. Hurley, *Shillelagh*, particularly 187-220, 247-284.

¹⁷⁹ In many of the murders, drunkenness was a factor for one or both parties. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 320; English, *Paddy Whacked*, 19; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 225.

inconsequential. Unfortunately for New York's B'hoys and gangsters, the abrupt, liminal timeline of nativist power in the 1850s mirrored their own fleeting influence.¹⁸⁰

Conclusion: Growing Concerns over the Shirtless Democracy

While ephemeral, Nativism and its extralegal actions brought increased concern over partisan violence on the streets to the forefront of American consciousness. Nativists unwisely attempted to fight fire with fire by rooting themselves in illegal action, made little progress, and accelerated the already decreasing government tolerance for extralegal action. Urban social turbulence appeared to be on the rise and needed to be addressed. The notorious traits globally associated with the famine generation Irish in general and Five Points in particular included gang activity, drunkenness, extreme poverty, urban degradation, club formations not loyal to the rule of law, and most visibly, rioting. The Know Nothings demonised the Irish with a rhetoric that proved politically unproductive, but moderates, though primarily preoccupied with the issue of slavery, did eventually wake up to the serious threat the Shirtless Democracy posed to the long term stability of the United States.¹⁸¹

As mentioned, American cities were engines of massive growth in the nineteenth century. With this growth came ever greater complexities in urban form and function, and the need for a more modern governmental approach to accommodate these complexities. New York City was the leading edge of American modernisation by the 1850s. It was the country's most famous and fastest industrialising urban centre, pumping economic and cultural lifeblood into the United States "as the heart is to the body." In the long term, New York's politics could not be left to the chaos of gang factions.

¹⁸⁰ Shannon, *Irish American*, 45-46.

¹⁸¹ Kenny, "Anti-Irish Sentiment," 371.

In the centre of the chaos were New York's Irish-Americans. After the community established a foothold in America, an entire generation of immigrants sought upward mobility, and found their best opportunities in politically motivated extralegal action. They were both influenced by and influential to New York City's antebellum gang culture, making the Bowery B'hoy a famous cultural identity. Politically, ward-level radical factions of the Democratic Party profited politically and financially through electioneering. Culturally, the Irish community ably stood its ground against hostile members of the native-born WASP proletariat. Yet above them all, New York's state government, still largely controlled by the elite "aristocracy" despised by Nativist Bowery B'hoys and the Irish community clubs alike, decided to wrest control away from the proletariat as part of ongoing modernisation efforts. All of these forces, including the Republican State Legislature, the Democratic municipal government, the Nativist and Irish gangs, and the overarching necessity for proto-Progressive modernisation, came to a head in the summer of 1857.

Chapter Three

Republicans, Reform and Riot: The Summer of 1857 and the Underworld's Breaking Point

The Murder of William Poole

Bill “the Butcher” Poole was bound to the Bowery Boy identity. His nickname derived from his chosen trade. The antebellum butcher’s cleaver, bloodstained apron, and practical contributions to the community frequently placed their profession in a leadership position. Poole himself, a fiercely aggressive Know Nothing leader who first rose to prominence under an alliance with Bowery Boy Isaiah Rynders, exemplified a native-born, working-class hero.¹⁸²

John Morrissey, also known as “Old Smoke,” could almost be described as the mirror image of Poole: leaders on opposite sides of Five Points. Both men were 24 years old, employed in important community roles, neither owned any property, and both were legendary fighters.¹⁸³ Despite these similarities, in politics the two men represented the antithesis of one other. While Poole and his ally Rynders represented the anti-immigrant Know Nothings, “Old Smoke” Morrissey rallied his Irish rowdies for the Democrats.¹⁸⁴

The first blows between Poole and Morrissey were thrown in a pugilism contest, the highest spectacle of antebellum manliness. Old Smoke casually challenged the Butcher to the brawl in a neighbourhood saloon the evening prior to the match, and they met at the Amos Street

¹⁸² Peter Adams, *The Bowery Boys: Street Corner Radicals and the Politics of Rebellion*, (Westport, CT: Praeger), 18. For more on the cultural roles played by the Famine generation of urban American labourers see Richard B. Stott, *Workers in the Metropolis: Class, Ethnicity and Youth in Antebellum New York* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), particularly 263-264.

¹⁸³ Elliott J. Gorn, “‘Good-Bye Boys, I Die a True American’: Homicide, Nativism, and Working Class Culture on Antebellum New York City,” *Journal of American History* 74 (Sept. 1987), 390.

¹⁸⁴ Morrissey also began his political career as part of Rynder’s Empire Club, but quickly went his own way after Captain Rynders left the Democratic Party for the Nativists. The story behind Morrissey’s ubiquitous nickname is best told by William E. Harding, sporting editor of the *Police Gazette*. Morrissey became interested during his visits to New York with one Kate Ridgley, who was already another man’s mistress. The other man, Tom McCann, was a noted street fighter and soon challenged Morrissey to a match for Kate’s full affection:

At the commencement of the fight McCann was successful, and threw Morrissey heavily. As he fell a stove was overturned, a bushel of red-hot coals rolled out, and Morrissey was forced on them. McCann held him there until the smell of burning flesh filled the room. The bystanders threw water on the coals, and the gas and steam arose in McCann’s face and choked and exhausted him. Morrissey then had his own way, and bucked and pounded McCann into insensibility. From that time until the day of his death Morrissey was called ‘Old Smoke.’

Quoted in M.R. Werner, *Tammany Hall* (New York: Greenwood, [1928] 1968), 69; Herbert Asbury, *Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 1928), 83-85.

dock, now Christopher Street, at seven in the morning on July 27th, 1854. Spectators circled around the two fighters, forming the ring, and after some light sparring, three minutes of “inhuman struggle” ensued. The contest, arguably a pro-Poole draw, saw Morrissey leave with blood streaming from both eyes, while the Butcher’s cheek sported a long laceration “where the flesh had been torn by his opponent’s teeth.”¹⁸⁵ The encounter solved nothing. Both men were too influenced by the subculture of rough justice to change until one man was killed.

The rivalry reached fatal proportions on February 25th, 1855. After numerous additional minor encounters, Poole ran into Morrissey and a group of his followers at the newly opened Stanwix Hall on Broadway near Prince Street. An argument ensued when Morrissey noticed Poole enter the main barroom at nine that evening. After the men traded insults, Poole drew his pistol, pointed it, and yelled, “You tasted my mutton before; how do you like it?” referencing a previous beating Morrissey took at the hands of Poole and several dozen friends. Intervention from a third party failed while the men continued to goad, insult, and challenge each other’s courage, and Morrissey acquired a pistol of his own. A shot from Morrissey misfired as both parties were at last being separated, and police intervened. Both men were taken away, detained and quickly released in short order.

Morrissey barhopped his way through several other saloons that night, required an escort home, and fell asleep around midnight. He never re-encountered Poole, who had returned to Stanwix and was still drinking late into the night with two companions. Just as the night seemed destined to be forgotten, seven associates of Morrissey chose to finish their night at Stanwix Hall as well. More vocal exchanges followed, this time over a refused drink. Momentarily the two sides appeared to calm, until suddenly a Morrissey ally drew a heavy colt revolver, braced it

¹⁸⁵ The brawl drew the attention of the press, including an article in the *Police Gazette* crime journal. T.J. English, *Paddy Whacked: The Untold Story of the American Gangster* (New York: ReganBooks, 2005), 25.

against the crook of his arm to aim, told his friends to “sail in,” – and shot through his own elbow. A flurry of shots rang out, including one which struck Poole in the leg. Another of the Morrissey entourage, former policeman Lewis Baker, wrestled with Poole on the ground, gained the upper hand, and shot the Butcher point blank in the chest.

Poole lingered for twelve days, and died on March 8th with the final words: “Goodbye boys, I die a true American.” During the autopsy, the coroner removed Baker’s bullet from the Butcher’s heart. To the Nativists, Poole was a martyr, and a massive procession attended his funeral, which was one of the biggest in New York’s history. Morrissey and his accomplices were tried, but after numerous hung juries, murder charges were dropped. Whether the Morrissey entourage deliberately returned to murder Poole was certainly possible, but never proven. This was mainly because nobody could be found to testify about their intentions prior to arriving at Stanwix a second time.¹⁸⁶ The whole escapade launched the fame and reputations of Morrissey and the late Bill Poole alike well outside of lower Manhattan. The press covered every aspect of the murder and trials with great detail, and Poole’s final phrase “I die a true American” became a popular rallying call for Nativists, used to great applause by actors playing the Bowery.¹⁸⁷

The rivalry of Poole and Morrissey is an example of how out-of-hand gang violence in New York City became by the mid-1850s. Hostilities were no longer restricted to electioneering,

¹⁸⁶ The reconstruction of the Poole murder is drawn from the coroner’s inquest, in trial transcripts of the murder as covered by the press, and cross referenced with contemporary media sources, all of which were both detailed and at times contradictory. The best synthesis of these sources is found in Gorn, “Good-Bye Boys,” 388-390; English, *Paddy Whacked*, 25.

¹⁸⁷ A half dozen other retellings followed in the next century and a half, often with confused details but always gaining a pulp following. The first was by William Knapp, who published “*I Die a True American*”: *The True Life of William Poole* in 1855. Poole was even the inspiration for Daniel Day Lewis’s character Bill Cutting in the 2002 Martin Scorsese film *Gangs of New York*. The tale reverberates over time because it contains all the elements of a juicy American street story: vice, alcohol, bravado, violence, wastefulness and even darkly comic incompetence; its popularity is a guilty pleasure the masses gladly consume. The barely historical retellings include Charles Sutton, *The New York Toombs* (New York, 1874), chapter 9; William E. Howe and A.H. Hummel, *In Danger* (New York, 1888), 6-15; “The Killing of Bill the Butcher” in Asbury’s *Gangs of New York*; Alvin F. Harlow, *Old Bowery Days* (New York, 1931), chapter 16; and finally John Lander, “That was New York: The Martyrdom of Bill the Butcher,” *New Yorker* March 20 1954, 41-57, and March 27 1954, 38-59; Gorn, “Good-Bye Boys,” 388-390.

and the Sporting subculture had lost its focus, often craving notoriety over serving the community will. Five Points rowdies and politicians did not exist on the fringes of society; they stood proudly at its centre. An estimated quarter of a million clogged the streets for Poole's funeral.¹⁸⁸ Morrissey eventually exemplified a prototype for both the Irish-American community, and the framework for the American gangster. Men of such ilk often lived short lives, built upon street toughness. Though numerous significant achievements like upward mobility were won, most gains were through morally questionable means, at best. American gangsters lived extreme lifestyles in an extreme environment. They were highly ambitious, charismatic, audaciously dressed, unencumbered by the law, brutally physical, and yet often ended their lives far more ignominiously than they would have preferred. The sporting subculture by the time of Poole's death had existed for too long with too little resistance. From 1854 to 1857, Fernando Wood and the Republican Party in Albany, respectively, both undermined and subjugated the gangs of New York to practical political irrelevance. This chapter explores that transition.

Impending Cultural and Political Change in New York City

In New York by the midpoint of the 1850s, lower Manhattan slums were riddled with community groups and gangs, young men inspired by the early Shirtless Democrats. Most often, the conglomerations of gangs were leaderless. Therefore whenever a charismatic individual with exceptional leadership skills came along, they had the potential to make a significant impact past Election Day hooliganism. Further, young immigrants and nativists alike felt a potent dissatisfaction with their surroundings, and could be willingly organised and unleashed into extralegal action. While figures like Rynders, Walsh, Morrissey and Poole all represented groups

¹⁸⁸ Gorn, "Good-Bye Boys," 390-391.

of people and sentiments larger than themselves, they also nurtured an environment of illegality and chaos which could not survive indefinitely.

In particular, the open use of gangs in election fraud was reaching a breaking point by the mid-1850s. Tammany Hall had used gangs openly in this capacity since 1834, and political clubs had thrived in the midst of Democratic sectionalism. Still, New York antebellum riots were met by the government with decreasing tolerance and rising force over time.¹⁸⁹ Inevitably a tipping point would be reached whereby the rule of law would have to, in practice, assert its dominance over traditions of rough justice by norm rather than exception. This chapter asserts that such a tipping point occurred in the summer of 1857 over a crisis between two competing police forces.

The transition from chaos into governmental ordering could not have taken place peacefully, at least not in the culture extant in antebellum New York. The community traditions in Five Points and the Bowery had bred a culture where children grew up to become Bowery Boys, Plug Uglies, and Roche Guards. In January 1850, Chief of Police George Matsell estimated that New York was home to at least three thousand vagrant and criminal children. Many young men carried knives or revolvers in public. As the decade went on, conflicts between different neighbourhood political groups only became deadlier and, as in the case of Poole, nobody was being held accountable for the consequences of violent crime.¹⁹⁰ Respect for the rule of law needed to be taught as a hard lesson to a community so unfamiliar with it.

In this transition it must be noted that just as the traditions of rough justice should not be regarded as inherently backward or without merit, neither should the rule of law or actions of the

¹⁸⁹ The first major turn towards violent government force to put down disorder was the Astor House Riot in 1849, as discussed in the second chapter. Barnett Schecter, *The Devil's Own Work: The Civil War Draft Riots and the Fight to Reconstruct America* (New York: Walker & Company, 2005), 32.

¹⁹⁰ James F. Richardson, *The New York Police: Colonial Times to 1901* (New York: Oxford University Press), 51-53, 113. As an example of rising danger and deadliness, six bar-room shootings or stabbings were recorded in a single night in November 1857. *New York Times*, Nov 20th, 1857.

police necessarily be considered just. Even in modern times, the law may enforce injustice as much as justice. Contemporary laws may likewise be created for partisan reasons as frequently as for the good of an entire population. While the rule of law was a required step towards American modernity, one finds that morality and altruism scarcely factored into the establishment of the modernised system. The 1857 police and home rule crises, capped by the Police and Bowery Boys Riots, were filled with moral white, grey, and black areas in the name of modernisation and the rights of the people.

Therefore New York City in the mid-1850s, from the physical city itself, the communities within it, the individuals governing it, and the structure of its civic services, is best viewed as a city in flux. In numerous ways and for numerous reasons, Irish-American New York was caught right in the centre of these developments. The power niche lower Manhattan rowdies created for themselves drove parts of the sudden flux, but not all of it. Modernising and punitive forces at the state level, well outside the insular worldviews of the New York Irish, descended down upon immigrant and native sporting neighbourhoods with sweeping and lasting change. In 1854 alone, the Republican Party was born in response to the national collapse of the Whigs, Fernando Wood was elected for the first time as New York's mayor amid great scepticism, and the escalating debate over the expansion of slavery in the West was met with bloodshed in Kansas. Kansas remained a side stage for New York until the Civil War itself, but the modernising Republicans and the divisive Mayor Wood were central figures in the 1857 crises and violence.

While slavery and abolition rapidly became the greatest national issues affecting America, Five Pointers cared little about the horrors of human bondage. Mike Walsh, always

speaking for the white working class of New York, said in 1854 from the floor of the United States House:

The only difference between the negro slave of the South and the white wage slave of the North is that one has a master without asking for him, and the other has to beg for the privilege of becoming a slave.... The one is the slave of an individual; the other is the slave of an inexorable class.

It is all very well for gentlemen to get up here and clamor about the wrongs and outrages of the southern slaves, but, sir, even in New York, during the last year, there have been over thirteen hundred people deprived of their liberty without any show or color of offense, but because they were poor, and too honest to commit a crime.¹⁹¹

Men like Walsh had no interest in abolition, and his insular views reflected the views of the New York Irish community. Perhaps indicative of how the New York subcultures were losing touch with the winds of change, Walsh was the only Democrat from New York to seek re-election in 1854, in spite of great antagonism from the major New York newspapers dubbing him an “enemy of freedom.” Despite carrying his core regions of support, Walsh’s political career ended when he suffered a narrow defeat to soft Democrat John Kelly.¹⁹²

The abolitionist shift in Federal politics in the mid-1850s destroyed one party, the Whigs, and gave rise to the Republican Party as successor. Bill Poole, sometimes called a Whig hero, died near the bitter end of the party’s fall. The Whigs, created as a pro-Bank party in the 1830s,

¹⁹¹ William V. Shannon, *The American Irish* (New York: Macmillan), 55.

¹⁹² Slavery was never a key issue for the New York Irish, but the overwhelming majority were certainly against abolition. Throughout the Jacksonian and antebellum eras white supremacy was a major tenet of the Democratic Party, and the Irish used this racial caste system to insist upon their rising within the racial hierarchy and voting power. John Kelly was regarded as a “soft” Democrat for his accepting take on slavery. Jerome Mushkat, *Fernando Wood: A Political Biography* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1990), 98; Adams, *Bowery Boys*, 114-115. For more on Five Points’ acceptance of a racial caste system see Schecter, *Devil’s Own Work*, 32-36, 62; for Northern workers such as the New York Irish constructing and advancing their own conceptions of “whiteness” over African Americans, see David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, [1991] 2007), 10-14, 110; for attitudes to slavery see Florence E. Gibson, *The Attitudes of the New York Irish toward State and National Affairs, 1848-1892* (New York: AMS Press [1951] 1968), Chapter IV.

simply could not accommodate for slavery as the dominant issue in American politics.¹⁹³ More pious, often pro-temperance men who stood for law and order filled the political vacuum, men like *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley.¹⁹⁴ The Republican Party swept through the North along with other anti-slavery candidates in the 1854 election, taking power in the House of Congress and every Northern state legislature except Massachusetts and Delaware, who elected Know Nothing majorities. The xenophobic Know Nothings also gained considerable support in New York State, hoping to check the growing power of immigrants, yet their success and effectiveness proved limited in comparison to the rising Republican powerhouse.¹⁹⁵

Five Pointers saw no appeal in the Republican Party. Protestants, abolitionists, prohibitionists, Nativists, and former Whigs did not make an appealing alliance to the lower Manhattan saloon owner, grocer, or labourer. Worse still, Protestant evangelicals tired of minimal progress in slum districts shifted the focus of their efforts to slavery. A group which was once only an annoyance for the urban Irish became an ideological enemy. Evangelicals blamed “wage slaves” for their own poor circumstances. By adopting a traditional American narrative and preaching individualism, evangelicals believed that a labourer could choose one’s lot in life through hard work and integrity alone. Such rhetoric fit perfectly into common justifications for

¹⁹³ The Whig power base swiftly eroded from self destruction in the 1852 national election. Already facing internal divisions between Northern and Southern supporters, Winfield Scott, an antislavery candidate received the party nomination for President. Democrats faced the same dilemma, but chose New Hampshire’s Franklin Pierce, a northerner with Southern sympathies, as a uniting candidate. During the general election Southern Whigs defected to Pierce as part of a Democrat landslide. Editor of the *New York Tribune*, and leading Whig voice Horace Greeley declared the party dead. Schecter, *The Devil’s Own Work*, 54. For greater detail on 1857 national politics including Dred Scott, the Buchanan administration, and Bloody Kansas not covered here, see Kenneth M Stamp, *America in 1857: A Nation on the Brink* (New York: Oxford University, 1990).

¹⁹⁴ Greeley had despised Democrats for their proslavery views even while still a Whig, and by 1854, spurred on by the Kansas-Nebraska free soil dispute, the editor galvanised antislavery opinion through the expanding influence of his *Tribune*. He called for a new national party to unite all Free Soil advocates abandoning the Whigs and Democrats. Greeley furthermore proposed for the new party “some simple name like Republican” which would “fitly designate those who have united to restore our Union to its true mission of champion and promulgator of Liberty.” Schecter, *The Devil’s Own Work*, 55-56.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

the widening class and wealth gap, absolving unchecked industrialisation and capitalism from blame.¹⁹⁶

Fernando Wood, the Municipal Police, and One Man Rule

To match wits with ascending Republicans, a new breed of Democratic politician arrived at the fore. The elder Democrat generation, men like Mike Walsh, Isaiah Rynders, President Andrew Jackson, and later Bill Poole and John Morrissey, championed Shirtless Democracy to politically capitalise on universal white male suffrage and empower impoverished urban subcultures which had previously been without a voice. Such men opened the door for raw, rough around the edges, non-“aristocrats” without elite pedigree to rise to higher office. The first “modern” Democrats, however, men like Fernando Wood, represented something else entirely. Wood began the evolution in American public life towards one man “Boss” rule and the career professional politician. Like his predecessors, Wood pandered to the newly enfranchised and embraced demagoguery, yet he flexibly held whichever morality allotted him the most votes. As a man and public figure, he was charming, clever, and opportunistically corrupt. Under Wood, previously independent, dispersed and diverse power centres, spread across the saloons and fire halls of New York, were centralised and organised under the single will of Tammany Hall. Shirtless Democratic tactics remained the same, but graft, intimidation and violence would now be directed from a central source. A true career politician, Wood formed and broke alliances with all sides and types as needed: from immigrant to nativist, merchants to labourers, petty rowdies

¹⁹⁶ The most direct attacks against Irish immigrants by evangelical reformers were excise laws. Much of the nineteenth century temperance movement blamed vice and social discord on alcohol, and in 1855 New York passed a sales prohibition law. The law was never enforced in New York City on order of the mayor and declared unconstitutional the next year, but in 1857 a new excise law looked to punish Mayor Wood and his Irish supporters for their headstrong opposition. Joanne Reitano, *The Restless City: A Short History of New York from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 66-67; Schechter, *Devil's Own Work*, 59-60; Edward K. Spann, *The New Metropolis: New York City, 1840-1857*, (New York: Columbia University, 1981), 372-375.

to Broadway titans, and dignified reformers to underworld gangsters. Wood's system, built to last, survived for an entire generation in New York City. In the process, Wood modernised New York City like no other, sought personal power for its own sake, and became one of the most controversial politicians of his generation.¹⁹⁷

Fernando Wood's ascent to the mayor's office came in a difficult period for New York politics. During the immigration boom, problems with sanitation, disease, and labour grew statistically worse, and ever more pressure fell on City Hall for reform. Sixth ward children under the age of two, for example, faced nearly a seventy percent mortality rate.¹⁹⁸ New York's Common Council (today's City Council) had responded with infamous corruption. Most notoriously, the 1851 Council, often called the "Forty Thieves" after the original Five Points gang, had sold off city assets for kickbacks, fostered bidding wars and monopolies over city contracts, and left city credit at risk due to rampant spending. In response, New Yorkers reformed the City Charter in 1853. The Common Council became weaker, the mayor stronger, and most important for this chapter, the Municipal Police became centralised.¹⁹⁹

Upon narrowly winning the 1854 election, new Mayor Fernando Wood inherited and directed a grand, overarching urban planning model for New York City.²⁰⁰ The 1853 Charter

¹⁹⁷ Far and away the best source detailing Fernando Wood's political career with insights into Wood as a professional and a man is Jerome Mushkat's *Fernando Wood: A Political Biography* (Kent, OH: Kent State University, 1990), 8-10, 95, 243-247; Reitano, *The Restless City*, 65.

¹⁹⁸ Most of the deaths in New York City during this period came from typhus and cholera epidemics south of Broadway, only increasing the flight of the wealthy uptown. For the entire city, mortality rates remained stagnant at forty per thousand from 1845 to 1854. In regards to labour, the cost of living jumped thirty percent due to inflation between 1853 and 1854, but labour wages remained relatively stagnant. Unions struck frequently in the face of growing "wage slavery," to little effect. Schecter, *Devil's Own Work*, 59-60.

¹⁹⁹ The 1851 Council was packed by Tammany with grocers, salon owners, artisans, small businessmen, and street toughs: exactly the type of men who became community and underworld heroes in Five Points. Under the 1853 Charter, the restructured police were headed by a select Board of Police Commissioners comprised of the mayor, city recorder, and city judge. Under the previous system, any elected councilmen could give appointments and serve as judges during their term without oversight. "Proposed Amendment of the New-York City Charter," *New York Times*, March 31st 1853, 3; Richardson, *New York Police*, 78-79.

²⁰⁰ To even achieve election, Wood needed to secure both sections of his fractured Democratic Party, stave off the resurgent tide of Know Nothing J.W. Barker by fifteen hundred votes and reformer Wilson J. Hunt by only five

placed Wood at the helm of New York's path to reform, with great personal independence and power. Such power and opportunity suited Wood well. The new mayor's early time in office inspired great optimism from commentators and pundits. The self-titled "model mayor" was highly organised, a good executive, intelligent, physically fit, and charming when required. His eloquently stated inauguration goals included an end to government inefficiency and corruption, the reduction of crime and violence, and businesslike improvements to municipal cleaning and law enforcement. Great reforming strides were made in early 1855, but none held a greater impact than Wood's rule over the Municipal Police.²⁰¹

While any effective reform in Five Points was difficult to come by, police reform took a high priority as gangs grew more powerful, corruption more obvious, and reporting on the subject ever more incendiary.²⁰² The New York Municipal Police were created in 1844 as the city's first full time force, replacing a dated and ridiculed night and day watch system long since overwhelmed by New York's rapid population growth.²⁰³ The task before the new force was

hundred ballots. All told, Wood received only a third of all ballots in the 1854 election. Xavier Donald MacLeod, *Biography of Hon. Fernando Wood, Mayor of the City of New York* (New York: O.F. Parsons, 1856), 157.

²⁰¹ Numerous notorious saloons and gambling dens were (temporarily) shuttered, new and more effective sweepers appeared on New York streets, and gratuities for public service officials were prohibited. Over the first six months of the administration Wood even created and personally managed an entry log at City Hall "for recording complaints against the police, as well as for violations of the ordinances and laws, where charges will be entertained, and acted upon by [Wood] in person." Schecter, *Devil's Own Work*, 62; Samuel Augustus Pleasants, *Fernando Wood of New York* (New York: Columbia, 1948), 12-13; Richardson, *New York Police*, 83-85; MacLeod, *Fernando Wood*, 157, 209; Mushkat, *Fernando Wood*, 1, 3, 15-18; Leonard Charmers, "Fernando Wood and Tammany Hall: The First Phase." *New York Historical Society Quarterly* 52 (July 1968), 383-384.

²⁰² Five Points' history in the antebellum era is littered with failed reform attempts. Dr. John Hoskins Griscom, for example, was a talented and dedicated public health pioneer appointed as City inspector for New York in 1842. He used his position to meticulously record the crowded and unhealthy conditions in lower Manhattan, delivering the Common Council a pragmatic and comprehensive list of recommendations for improving conditions in lower Manhattan. As a reward, councilmen unwilling to risk lost patronage from the reforms removed Griscom from office the next year. Perhaps the only large health measure to gain traction in his era was Central Park, which began construction in 1858 and continued until 1890. See John Hoskins Griscom, *The Sanitary Condition of the Laboring Population of New York: With Suggestions for Its Improvement* (New York: Harper, 1845); Schecter, *Devil's Own Work*, 48; Edwin G. Burrows, and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press), 785; François Weil, *A History of New York* (New York, Columbia University, 2004), 108.

²⁰³ The popular push for police reform which at last achieved lasting effect came after the murder of the "Beautiful Cigar Girl," Mary Celia Rogers in late July 1841. The unsolved case received incredible attention by local and national press, creating renewed interest for reform from 1841-1844. More practically, legislation creating the

daunting. The Police Department's poor reputation would be difficult to break; subcultures like the Bowery Boys did not necessarily defer to the views of City Hall, but held their own communal claims of power and legitimacy. Prostitution, thievery, alcoholism, and gambling were all rampant, but more than anything, riots were perceived as the greatest threat to basic public order.²⁰⁴

The Municipals were based on the police system in London, England, but unlike the London Municipals, New York's police were not properly separated from the political process. New York Police appointments, as before, remained in the hands of the party controlling City Hall. More, New York Municipals were required to live in the ward they served, forcing them into politics, while many London officers were recruited from outside the city itself.²⁰⁵ While politics for many reformers represented the main obstacle to progress, Mayor Wood realised that a professional politician could twist the bureaucracy forward by embracing the politics of the gangs.²⁰⁶ Wood's Municipal Police reforms made progress because they offered political return for whomever established order over the rowdy Auld Sixth. Much of the earlier reform

Municipal Police Department gained traction from a joint special committee report to the Common Council in December of 1842, which read like an article from the *Police Gazette* tabloid:

The property of the citizen is pilfered, almost before his eyes. Dwelling and warehouses are entered with an ease and coolness of detection which shows that none are safe. Thronged as our city is, men are robbed in the street. Thousands, that are arrested, go unpunished, and the defenceless and the beautiful are ravished and murdered in the day time, and no trace of the criminals is (sic) found.

Proceedings and Documents of the Board of Assistant Alderman of the City of New York XIX, No. 56, 188, New York City Archives, New York, New York; Schechter, *Devil's Own Work*, 49; Burrows et. al, *Gotham*, 376-377; Richardson, *New York Police*, 26, 31. For more on the case of Mary Rogers and the push towards the New York City Police Reform Act of 1845, see Amy Gilman Srebnick, *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers: Sex and Culture in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Oxford, 1997).

²⁰⁴ As a side note regarding prostitution's pervasiveness, the Board of Aldermen in 1844 formed a committee which estimated a total of ten thousand practicing prostitutes within the city limits, many of whom were young teenagers or preteens. Richardson, *New York Police*, 27.

²⁰⁵ The London police, for instance, were never charged with enforcing staunchly unpopular laws, such as saloon closures for the Sabbath, for political reasons. In fact, British officials felt that attempts to legislate such unpopular moral standards were detrimental to Force morality and efficiency. Richardson, *New York Police*, 49, 297.

²⁰⁶ Wood in a February 1856 speech opined that comparisons between London and New York were unfair. New York, after all, was far less policed per capita: at one officer to every 812 citizens as opposed to London's one for every 351. As such, the London statistics reflected greater visibility and levels of enforcement New York could not expect to achieve. Nor did they wish to, since America's rampant individualism, previously discussed, sought decentralised power whenever available. *Ibid*, 41-42.

stagnation came from men like Walsh, Rynders, or Morrissey strong arming out anyone attempting to wrest control over local saloons and patronage posts. Until Wood rose to the mayor's office, no individual combined the will, power, and lack of scruples required to effect change.²⁰⁷

The Municipal Police were undoubtedly more modern than the organisation they replaced, but no less corrupt. With local crime prevention in mind, each city ward was given its own station house, from which officers were nominated for mayoral approval. The mayor filled the force, 800 men strong, with Democratic loyalists, including many gang members useful for their physical skills during elections. Rewards were still allowed to be kept, wards were unevenly manned, and some police refused to wear their new star shaped copper identity badges as regulated in lieu of uniforms.²⁰⁸

During the course of reform, Mayor Wood also kept busy publicly and clandestinely consolidating power. Wood's goals were not sinister per se, but he was driven by self reliance and fierce personal ambition to achieve total "one man rule" over New York. In general, Wood felt only his judgement could provide creative solutions for practical problems with city services. In order to sustain such progress, and of course retain his political status, Wood embraced and advanced the practice of machine politics. For Five Points, this specifically meant centralising

²⁰⁷ The heads of political groups like the Empire Club and Spartan Band could through various means block a candidate's nomination for alderman or assistant alderman, and had promised to destroy any candidate who voted for police reform. Ibid, 31-32, 36, 41-42.

²⁰⁸ The common slang for police officers as "cops" derives from these copper badges, just as the bobby pin attaching the badges to London officers earned them their nickname. New York's policemen rhetorically objected to uniforms on numerous grounds, among them that it "conflicted with their notions of decency and self respect;" that it was "expensive and fantastical;" that it represented the beginnings of a standing army in the City, "breaking of the ground wherein popular freedom would be buried." Realistically, objections derived from the fact that a uniform meant more work for an easily identifiable officer on duty. As for rewards, long time officer Robert Bowyer made \$756 from rewards from 1845 to 1847, a tidy sum worth over a year's wage (between, \$500 to \$700 depending on rank). Under Fernando Wood, he fared even better. Between January 1st, 1855, and April 30th, 1857, he received \$4700 total in sums including \$1500, \$500, \$300 and several others over \$100 at one time, a total well over twice his salary for the same period (\$800 per annum). David T. Valentine, *Manual of the Corporation of the City of New-York for 1854* (New York: McSpedon & Baker, 1854), 85-101; *New York Times*, June 30th, 1854; Schecter, *Devil's Own Work*, 50; Richardson, *New York Police*, 58-59, 62-66.

local street level corruption under the Tammany wing. This meant, for instance, that during his time in office Mayor Wood supervised every department, though it technically overstepped his authority under the City Charter.

The 1853 Charter itself, though wildly extending the power of the mayor's office, was not enough for Wood. Right from his inauguration speech, Mayor Wood termed the charter an "ill-shaped monster" preventing him from properly governing the city. Targeting the Municipal police as the most egregious example, Wood noted that though he was in title the head of the Police Department, he lacked "the essential elements of authority, that of controlling the retention or removal of his own subordinates." The only acceptable solution, according to Wood, was substantially revising the charter towards home rule, with a vertical structure overseen by an executive with "one man power." In the Common Council's submission for a charter reform and police act to Albany, Wood wrote:

The Common Council itself is deficient in certain powers essential to the proper conduct of the vast amount of legislation which the growing necessities of the City occasion. The chief executive officer of the City Government requires an increase of power to be concentrated in his hands, to meet the responsibilities which naturally fall upon him in preserving good order among the inhabitants of the City, and efficiency and integrity in the various Departments.²⁰⁹

Wood argued that the "one man rule" solution was required to remove politics from the Board of Police Commissioners. Under the 1853 charter, the board was comprised of the mayor, Recorder and Hard Democrat James M. Smith, and Whig City Judge Sidney Stuart. This created, according to Wood, both conflicts of interest and political strife between the courts and commissioners, all of whom were elected. Wood declared that the Common Council should instead place him alone in charge to increase efficiency and rise above departmental politics for

²⁰⁹ *New York Times*, January 3rd, 1855, 4; *Times*, "State Affairs," January 30th, 1855, 1; Mushkat, *Fernando Wood*, 41.

the good of all New Yorkers. His demand yielded few results and created a political battle which ignited great cynicism among supporters and opponents alike. Not to be delayed, Wood in the interim intimidated Recorder Smith into backing the mayor's rulings, took advantage when an illness struck Judge Stewart, and became the Board's acting head.²¹⁰

Thus, the subjugation of New York's municipal police, and with them the gangs of lower Manhattan to the will of Fernando Wood, happened freely and publicly. The police department was important to Wood for several reasons. The mayor rejected the views of many New York elites that crime, anti-social behaviour and the rise of street gangs was strictly the fault of recent immigrants. New York, Wood knew, was never an orderly city, but "an odd, wild metropolis, where if we had not two or three murders or a saucy riot or two with our matutinal tea or coffee, we were disappointed."²¹¹ Though this was an exaggeration, New York was accustomed to chaos and familiar with violence. By leading a strong new police department structured under his own ideas and command, Mayor Wood could in one swoop reign in lawlessness, win a political victory over his opponents, and strengthen his support with the working classes of lower Manhattan.²¹²

The reforms, at first, like many of Wood's early mayoral acts, appeared wildly successful. Bookings increased drastically from 1853 to 1854, and even staunch critic Horace Greeley praised the decision to run "magical" telegraph wire from every precinct house, previously left as entirely their own pods, to a Central Office on Mulberry Street. The new

²¹⁰ Though one man rule certainly solved inefficiency, Wood never explained how exactly as an elected official himself he could suddenly transform into an apolitical force. In theory a new Charter would improve city efficiency through a centralised authority, thus weakening the power of ward subcultures on city politics. It was assumed that the mayor, city recorder, and judge, elected city wide, would be higher status men less prone to corruption than aldermen. Though wealthy and constantly preaching lofty rhetoric, Fernando Wood was also undoubtedly corrupt. *New York Tribune*, January 12th, 1855, 4; Mushkat, *Fernando Wood*, 45.

²¹¹ MacLeod, *Fernando Wood*, 156.

²¹² As stated in Wood's 1856 campaign biography, largely ghostwritten by Wood himself, "Mr. Wood knew that he had something to do, and that he could not do it alone. This police corps was supposed to belong to him *ex suo officio*, and therefore has his will to carry out as their task in official life." MacLeod, *Fernando Wood*, 205-206.

system could centrally direct and amass officers as needed in the case of a riot or other emergency.²¹³ Not only was Wood's Police takeover relatively public, it was a great source of praise. George Templeton Strong echoed Greeley's praise across all reforms, "Mayor Wood continues our Civic Hero - inquiring, reforming, redressing, laboring hard with amble result of good. If he goes on his way to the end of his term, he will be a public benefactor, recognised as such and honored with statues."²¹⁴

Beneath this public face, one man had taken Tammany's political control of the city's most influential and armed force down to a Ward level. The chosen reforms were part of public political image, and personal private power. Prostitution was pushed off the streets, but not out of the saloons. Only the least lucrative or disloyal saloon and gambling dens were raided, and many continued to run openly. Primaries remained controlled by the gang system of saloonkeepers and ward heelers. Wood allowed this to continue because he knew how to secure a base support from the immigrant classes in lower Manhattan. The gangs, in order to continue operating extralegally, needed at the very least for the police to turn a blind eye to their meetings and activities. Wood offered far more than tacit acceptance of the gangs. He offered gangs the ability to continue their activities undeterred, but with the understanding that during elections their rowdies served the mayor's will. Fernando Wood thus become New York City's first unofficial "Boss," setting a precedent Tammany Hall maintained for a generation.²¹⁵

²¹³ Booking statistics dove down again over the first eight Sundays for 1855, with only 338 from 878 the year earlier. The difference was attributed by Wood to the effectiveness of his force for lowering crime. In reality, the police remained as corrupt as ever. MacLeod, *Fernando Wood*, 215-216; Schechter, *Devil's Own Work*, 65.

²¹⁴ George Templeton Strong, *The Diary of George Templeton Strong: Vol. 2* (New York, Macmillan, 1952), 211.

²¹⁵ Policemen in these wards were happy to comply with this arrangement; after all, they resided in the same wards they served, and were hardly eager to enforce laws against the will of their communities. Sporting men in particular were untouchable, since no jury would convict them, and some policemen even continued to supplement their incomes working as security for gambling houses. Richardson, *New York Police*, 57; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 227-228, 277-278. For more on the challenges antebellum lawmakers encountered with juries who refused to convict vigilantes and other communally accepted acts of violence, see Elizabeth Dale, *Criminal Justice in the United States, 1789-1939* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University, 2011), Chapter 4.

By controlling the Police Board, Wood himself now distributed the police patronage mill, long in place with few changes, for his own ends.²¹⁶ The ranks of the Municipals remained filled with immigrant Democratic supporters, who would in exchange for their appointments fund Wood's election campaign. Further, just as how rioters and gangsters had been let out of prisons on election days, officers were also given elections off to act as partisan thugs on the Tammany payroll. In the 1856 election, they attacked opposition speakers with rocks and bricks, started riots at the same rallies, harassed voters, stole returns, and stuffed ballot boxes with rigorous effectiveness.²¹⁷

Many of the appointed municipal officers under Wood were part of the immigrant community, predominantly first or second generation American Irish, men the mayor could rely on politically. This created considerable hostility from both Know Nothings, who felt the Irish were taking the jobs of inherently superior native born Americans, and New York's predominantly Republican elite, who correctly accused the mayor of using the police to consolidate power. In February 1855 New York City's board of Aldermen, most of whom were Nativists, demanded to see the Municipal roster broken down by ethnicity, with attention paid to naturalised policemen and policemen living in the country for less than five years. Wood's chief of police took six weeks to comply before submitting figures which may well have been doctored. Of 1,135 Municipals, 718 were reported as born in the United States, and 305 out of

²¹⁶ Appointed officers could only be removed with a stated reason, but prospective appointments could be refused for far less. Technically, applicants needed to have twenty five signatures testifying to good character, pass a physical examination, show the ability to read and write in English, as well as the ability to do arithmetic. In practice, the 1854 refusals were far more arbitrary. Some men were appointed or reappointed in their fifties, others were refused on account of their age. One man, fifty-three years old, was described as "old and feeble." While there were no comments about a man's politics, they could be rejected in other ways. The list of prospective names for appointment included private scribbled notations by the board such as "I don't like him," and "He won't do." "List of Candidates for appointment or reappointment on the force with remarks on the character of each, etc 1854," Valentine, *Manual for 1854*, 123-150, New York City Archives, New York, New York; Ernst, *Immigrant Life*, 163; Adams, *Bowery Boys*, 132-135; Richardson, *New York Police*, 56-58, 79-80.

²¹⁷ Mushkat, 57-59; Schecter, *Devil's Own Work*, 65.

the 417 born abroad were reported to be Irish. The percentage of Irish-Americans on the force, twenty-seven percent, was thus reported as nearly identical to the reported percentage of Irish born Americans in New York according to the 1855 census. The Nativists refused to accept the report, but decentralisation and a lack of canvassing meant the council's estimations were no more than just that.²¹⁸

While the mayor continually promised a competent, honest, orderly, and efficient force, numerous allies grew disillusioned. Republican Lieutenant Governor Henry Raymond, owner and editor of the *New York Times*, which had been one of Wood's strongest nonpartisan public supporters since his election, by June 1855 issued a warning veiled in a complement,

No paper has more generously commended the Mayor for the good that he has done and the promises he has registered than the *Times*. As a no-party chief magistrate we have warmly endorsed him. Nor when he has acted as a party man have we uttered a word of objection. But when he seemed to us to have carried his partisan sentiments into a department that he promised should be sacred from their approach, we have fearlessly announced the fact and simply reminded him of his pledges *to the people*.²¹⁹

Over time, the *Times*, *Tribune*, and other papers noticed that Wood continued to dominate the Police Board and favoured appointing foreign-born Democrats, particularly Irishmen, to the Municipal ranks.²²⁰ Still, many citizens allowed the Mayor a continued vote of confidence because his police were generally improved in performing their duties. Arrests had grown,

²¹⁸ Instead of looking at the number of immigrant officers in the Police Department, the Nativists should have paid more attention to the specific instances of political graft instead. For the 1856 election, Wood was paid between \$15 and \$25 by captains to fund his campaign, and estimates of between \$8,500 and \$10,000, by the rest of the department. *New York Times* April 18 1857, 4; Ernst, *Immigrant Life*, 103; Richardson, *New York Police*, 70, 94; Mushkat, *Wood*, 49.

²¹⁹ "Politics and the Police," *New York Times*, June 4th, 1855, 4; For the *Times*' support of the Mayor, see, "Charter Reforms," *New York Times*, April 9th 1855, 4.

²²⁰ Lieutenant Governor Henry J. Raymond, who also edited and published the *New York Times*, was the first elite to abandon the mayor in March 1855 over his attempts to further reform to the 1853 charter. The *Times* published an editorial exposing Wood's autocratic control over the police Board, including partisan appointments despite his non-partisan rhetoric. Other Broadway elites remained allies temporarily, but after continued investigations, debates, and dubious tactics, few of the New York's most affluent backed the incumbent by Election Day 1856. *New York Times*, March 13, 1885; Richardson, *New York Police*, 86-89; Mushkat, *Fernando Wood*, 54-59.

discipline had improved, and the force remained within its budget despite growing more complex. If anything, the Municipal Police under Wood appeared in 1855 as a glowing commendation for one-man rule.²²¹

Wood's ego and demeanour, at once both his greatest strengths and weaknesses, presented the most consistent and supportable attack platforms for critics. George Templeton Strong in his diary acknowledged Wood's abilities and energetic activity as a reformer, but in closing added, "Pity he's a scoundrel."²²² During Wood's first and unsuccessful bid for mayor in 1850, New York elite and former mayor Phillip Hone upon hearing about the nomination in October wrote in his diary,

The Loco-focos have nominated Fernando Wood for mayor. There was a time when it was thought that the incumbent of this office should be at least an honest man. Fernando Wood! ... There is no amount of degradation too great for the party who expects to "rule the roost," and probably will. Fernando Wood, instead of occupying the mayor's seat, ought to be on the rolls of the State Prison.²²³

When Wood was grudgingly accepted by reformers as the Tammany mayoral nominee for the second time in 1854, Greeley expressed through the *Tribune*, "No man ever went into higher office under a deeper cloud of ignominy than [Wood] will." Tammany opponents had vetted

²²¹ For speeches Wood's handling of the police despite objections, see "The New Police: Public Remonstrance Against the Proposed Change in the System," *New York Times*, March 22nd, 1855, 1; Mushkat, *Fernando Wood*, 45-46, 52; Richardson, *New York Police*, 85.

²²² Strong, *Diary: Vol. 2*, 350.

²²³ Locofocos were contemporarily known as radical, pro-labour, Jeffersonian Democrats aimed at representing the middle and lower classes. In rhetoric, they spoke about a class conflict hardworking "producers" and the "non-producing" spectators and monopolists. In reality, this search for equality did not appear to factor into pro-slavery Locofoco views. The name Locofoco came from a Tammany nomination meeting in October 1835. At the meeting, rival Bank Democrats announced their election candidates and immediately killed the gas, hoping the blackened room would silence dissent and conclude the meeting. The trick was not original, and the anti-Bank radicals used newly invented friction matches, colloquially named "locofocos," to light candles and continue the meeting. Philip Hone, *The Diary of Philip Hone: Volume 2* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1889), 393; Mushkat, *Fernando Wood*, 8.

Wood while still a candidate and found testimony of questionable business dealings, personal finances, in addition to a secret alliance with Nativists.²²⁴

Throughout the wildfire in the papers, New York's Irish immigrants did not care about what the critics claimed to find, including the Nativist pact. Even a "scoundrel" whose views changed with the winds of popularity, which Wood certainly was, appeared a far better option to the Five Points than an openly anti-Irish candidate. More, Wood's personality and politics were incredibly relatable to the lower Manhattan community. As a Locofoco, he often spoke of class warfare and championed the plight of the labouring classes. Personally, Wood and Five Pointers both felt that their self-reliance and humble beginnings earned them a right to power, to dominate opponents and control events. Neither political force ever expressed self-doubt publically. Both were frequently blind to the sensibilities of others, particularly those on Broadway. Five Points regarded Fernando Wood as a kindred spirit, a man after their own interests, and were loyal to him throughout his political career.²²⁵

A chaotic, highly corrupt, power shifting 1856 election unified and empowered anti-Wood forces in New York State to strike at the mayor and his lower Manhattan base. Leading into his re-election campaign, Wood had more than sixteen thousand immigrants naturalised in 1856 alone - a record. Wood's immigrant police appointments of course continued to solidify his support among the newest poor, huddled masses, in conjunction with programs providing food and coal to the needy, hastening the construction of Central Park and expanding street paving to provide jobs, and even a failed measure for free higher education to children of the working

²²⁴ *New York Tribune*, November 15th, 1854; Hone, *Diary, Volume 2*, 395; Mushkat, *Fernando Wood*, 36-37.

²²⁵ As early as Wood's first annual address as mayor, Wood argued that as long as the mayor's office lacked power, the city could never be governed properly. Mushkat, 4, 28-37; Schechter, *Devil's Own Work*, 63.

class.²²⁶ Wood's handling of the police during election season involved considerably less altruism. Politically uncooperative police captains were demoted, appointed officers were forced to donate a portion of their salaries to his campaign creating an estimated \$10,000 war chest, and select patrolmen were freed from normal duties to intimidate voters, break up meetings and alter poll returns. When Wood's opponents began to sabotage his efforts, fearful of his ever growing power and disinterested in the plight of the urban working class, the mayor gave up democratic appearances. Specifically, police board member and city recorder Smith at last stood up to the mayor and refused acquiescence to the furlough of officers for election busting. In response, Wood illegally suspended the board altogether.²²⁷

The election itself involved the usual chaos, if to a slightly larger degree. Gangs on both sides broke up meetings and rallies, took brickbats to speakers, intimidated voters, and fought for candidates. Firearms were used more often than ever before, though no shooting fatalities were reported. The police remained loyal to their boss, unmoved by Recorder Smith and City Judge Capron issuing a warning in the *Times* that officers found electioneering would be dismissed. Off duty officers continued to electioneer, and those on duty did not interfere with repeat voters stuffing the ballot boxes. Out of the Sixth Ward for instance, only 75 of 200 policemen appeared for duty on Election Day.²²⁸ On the street corners and in the saloons, two younger faces led each

²²⁶ A corrupt, but certainly not a heartless man, Wood's biographer Jerome Mushkat credits the mayor for "pioneer[ing] the idea of government intervention to alleviate human injustice" from New York's City Hall. Many in Albany simply criticised Wood for pandering to the lower classes for support, while for some hardboiled American individualists, employing large amounts of the working class on public works projects amounted to a "monstrous doctrine [of] revolutionary France." *New York Evening Post*, November 10th, 1857, 1; Mushkat, *Fernando Wood*, 77; Adams, *Bowery Boys*, 134; Chalmers, "First Phase," 393.

²²⁷ *New York Times*, October 8th, November 24th, 1856; Mushkat, *Fernando Wood*, 58-59; Richardson, *New York Police*, 94-95.

²²⁸ The investigation into returns was quickly abandoned as fruitless by the county canvassers Board, as they returned from the German dominated Nineteenth ward with signed affidavits from residents stating that despite widespread and well reported chaos on rioting, the 1856 election was the "quietest and most orderly election that had been known for some time," emitting laughter from other Board members. It was actually a noted source of surprise that so much of the Democratic return was even obtained amid the riots. *New York Times*, October 8th, 28th, 1856; *New York Times*, "Board of County Canvassers" November 22nd, 1856; Mushkat, *Fernando Wood*, 58.

side of a city divided over its mayor. Irish-born sport and Bowery Boy brawler Pat Mathews generally led pro-Wood forces, while New York-born James E. Kerrigan and his Molly Maguire Boys were often at the forefront of anti-Wood belligerents.²²⁹ Wood's ticket narrowly prevailed, while his enemies flustered. For his betrayal, Recorder Smith was immediately placed before a grand jury to take the fall for the Mayor's suspicious activities. Judge Capron's re-election attempt fell short to Democrat Abraham Russell, a candidate placed by Wood himself.²³⁰ While the Republicans took power in the Governor's office and State House, New York's City Hall was won by a clear Democratic majority. Horace Greeley attributed the discrepancy to Wood's control over the police influencing the election in his favour, though it is impossible to determine if Wood might have legitimately won a plurality even without the support of the elites.²³¹

The Metropolitan Police Act: A Partisan Attack on New York City

Clashes between New York Democrats and the Albany Republicans and Know Nothings were inevitable. More than ideologically opposed, the Know Nothings personally disliked Mayor Wood for embracing Irish immigrants, while Republicans tired of New York's figurehead

²²⁹ Mathews lost his customhouse position just weeks before the election, which the *Leader Post* blamed on his "Wood Fever." Also, despite the chaos on election day, only one death was reported in the papers: Daniel McLean, a thirty five year old Irishman of the Eleventh Ward, who succumbed to injuries from a beating. *New York Leader Post*, September 14th, 1856; *Irish-American*, November 15th, 1856, 1; *New York Times*, "Death from Injuries," November 26th, 1856; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 274-278.

²³⁰ During the election, councilman Kerrigan was still best known for his involvement in the Poole murder, helping Lewis Baker temporarily escape the country. Mathews to that date was already notorious for breaking up Tammany meetings. Mushkat, *Fernando Wood*, 58. For more on the 1856 election, see *Irish-American*, November 15th, 1856; *New York Times*, November 5th, 6th, 17th, 19th, 1856; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 274-278. See also the Mayor's ghostwritten campaign biography, Xavier Donald MacLeod, *Biography of Hon. Fernando Wood, Mayor of the City of New York* (New York: O.F. Parsons, 1856), and its incendiary anti-Wood counterpart, Abijah Ingraham, *A Biography of Fernando Wood: A History of the Forgeries, Perjuries, and other Crimes of our "Model" Mayor* (New York: Hollinger, 1856).

²³¹ Wood's successful 1856 re-election espoused his typical contradictions of character. He ran an impressive public campaign based on his excellent record as a reformer, and held fast to party lines once securing the Tammany nomination. Yet behind the scenes he remained conniving, dangerous, and unafraid to break the law. Most egregiously, when it appeared the Board of Police Commissioners was at last ready to stand up to Wood's domination of the Department and not allow officers the election day off to assist Wood's campaign illegally, the mayor suspended the board altogether. *New York Daily Tribune* Nov 7 1856, 4; *New York Times*, Nov 24th, 1856; Richardson, *New York Police*, 94-95; Mushkat, *Fernando Wood*, 58-59.

corrupting reform attempts and the rule of law to consolidate municipal and personal power. Even Hard Democrats, continually outmanoeuvred by a Mayor who refused to consider other voices within Tammany, had reached their breaking point. Republican forces, after surviving the fall of their Whig predecessors, finally had the power to force through their vision of modernising America through legislation. The State legislature always technically had the legal ability to intervene with New York City's government structure and operations, and Mayor Wood by 1857 was considered an affront to Republican moralisation and modernisation. Therefore, a wide swath of legislation passed through Albany with anti-Wood bipartisan support in 1857. Some attacked New York's saloon culture, such as a liquor licensing law, some attacked the mayor's personal power, and some sought a new hegemonic format for New York's municipal government, but none were more serious and damaging to all than the Metropolitan Police Act.²³²

The conception of the Metropolitan Police Act (MPA) began with newly elected Republican Governor John King's message to the public on January 6th, 1857. While leaving the details up to the Legislature, he declared that New York required a "new Police System," one for which, due to past experiences, "the Legislature will hesitate to entrust the management of that system to the mayor alone." Doing so required both a new legislative act and amendment to New York's Charter. Finally, the Governor suggested a Police Board either appointed by his office or elected with guaranteed representation for each major party.²³³

²³² While Nativists and Hard Democrats were content to keep America's democracy shirtless in their power struggle with Democrats, Republicans were not. The needs for reform were legitimate, and previous attempts to enact effective change were frequently co-opted and corrupted. Richardson, *New York Police*, 81-83; Mushkat, *Fernando Wood*, 68-69. For more on "normalisation" and ordering as a process of governmentality, attempted by Republicans as part of their larger vision, see Patrick Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City* (New York: Verso, 2003), 7-8. For specific difficulties Republicans faced in their model to reform America's justice system, see Elisabeth Dale, *Criminal Justice in the United States, 1789-1939* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University, 2011).

²³³ "The Governor's Message," *New York Times*, January 7th, 1857, 4.

The *Times* expressed concerns over the act, not because of its attacks on the Mayor, but about the implications for New York City's civic authority, voice, and public welfare under the precedent of State reforms over city matters. Concerns over restricted liberty were warranted. In not only New York, but throughout the democratic world, police reform over the long term meant more than improving the effectiveness by which criminals were caught and tried. It was part of a process of ordering and controlling the city as a whole. If crime was to be effectively lowered, the rowdy culture of Five Points needed to be sanitised along with its tenements. New York's rapid growth and incredible diversity made this process particularly difficult, and perhaps it should be no surprise that reforms failed as often as they succeeded. Even London, from which New York drew many of its antebellum reforms, went through a half century of growing pains to establish an effective police force.²³⁴

The police bill was drawn up and submitted to Albany January 14th by District Attorney Hall and legal reformer David Dudley Field. The bill proposed to replace New York's Municipal Police Department, extant since 1845, with a brand new force, the Metropolitans, appointed by a new Board of Police Commissioners. Under the bill, three police commissioners would be appointed by the Governor, and the mayor would not be one of them. While the metropolitan name suggested application across greater New York, only New York County was mentioned. Board Commissioners could reorganise criminal courts, redistrict city wards, regulate elections, and otherwise control the established political machine whenever possible. They were subject neither to local officers nor local ordinances, removing all home rule. Adding insult to injury, the City was expected to fully fund this State controlled force; if the City refused, the expenses would simply be charged to New York County as taxes, which occupied the same physical space

²³⁴ Ibid; Richardson, *New York Police*, 23, 49. For an in-depth comparison between the formation of New York and London's first modern police forces, see Wilbur R. Miller, *Cops and Bobbies: Police Authority in New York and London, 1830-1870* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press), 105-139, 141-165.

in 1857. All told, the new Police Board, controlled by the State, gained extensive powers at the expense of authority in New York City, all paid for by local taxpayers.²³⁵

Even with a second draft expanding the “metropolitan” police district to include Kings, Westchester, and Richmond counties, the bill was a punitive strike aimed directly at Fernando Wood, and amounted to nothing more than a partisan takeover of the same flawed system the mayor oversaw. Idealised rhetoric surrounding police reform had consistently revolved around removing politics from the police, yet this bill made no attempt to do so. If there were still any lingering questions that the MPA was not an act of partisan demagoguery, King alleviated them by failing to appoint a single Democrat to the Metropolitan Police Board.²³⁶

Though the Municipal Police Act was undoubtedly rooted in partisanship, New York City was in dire need for some level of police reform. A snapshot of the New York Police Department at the start of 1857 revealed that, despite a decade of nearly continuous changes, the system exhibited familiar weaknesses. Many wards had a police presence which was either over or under-represented by population. Precinct captains, many of them gangsters, had almost free reign over their men and communities, causing varied levels of discipline, faithfulness, and effectiveness. Authorities on the Board of Police Commissioners left the chief of police as little more than a high profile clerk, and the politics of power still reigned supreme over the department rather than duty to the people. Wood’s one man mayoralty undermined many of his otherwise excellent reforms.²³⁷

Resistance to the legislation appeared quickly as lines were drawn between Wood’s “one man rule” and the Republican usurpation of New York City Home Rule. New Yorkers who

²³⁵ Richardson, *New York Police*, 96-97, 100-102; *New York Times*, Feb 28th, 1857; Mushkat, *Fernando Wood*, 70.

²³⁶ The five appointees were Simeon Draper, James W. Nye, and Jacob Cholwell of New York along with James Stranahan of Kings and James Bowen of Westchester. Prior to these appointments, many still held out hope for the reforms as a bipartisan solution. *New York Tribune*, April 15th, 1857.

²³⁷ Richardson, *New York Police*, 98.

understood the bill's threat to their city's agency, regardless of political affiliation, attacked the bill's morality and constitutionality. In February 1857, the Attorney-General referenced New York State's 1846 constitution in his official advisory opinion that the bill was unconstitutional. Section 2, Article X designated that local officials not specifically designated for State appointment ought to be locally elected or appointed. The *Times* and *Courier and Enquirer*, both theoretically in favour of reform, referenced one another while editorialising against the bill, as did many influential New Yorkers hoping to steer ever-malleable public opinion. *Harper's Weekly* stated the only practical effects of the new Bill were "to transfer the patronage of our city police to Albany." Even George Templeton Strong, far from the Mayor's greatest booster, admitted the Act was created "to take power out of the paws of Mayor Wood and get it into those of the other scoundrels at Albany." Only Horace Greeley's *Tribune* celebrated, believing the new bill would "take the Police from the control of its present reckless head, and effectually separate the Department for political aspirants who would use it for their own purposes." As for Five Pointers, many blamed the "Black Republicans" for trampling the political rights and powers of their community.²³⁸

Mayor Wood signed a council resolution declaring the Metropolitan Act unconstitutional and brought his fight to the courts. The impending crisis was certainly important enough for Fernando Wood to tie his office to the fate of the police crisis in 1857. After all, the mayor's office had served as the head of the Police Department since 1846, and nobody orchestrated the police as a political weapon better than Wood under the 1853 Charter. Knowing the debate

²³⁸ On May 1st, 1857, the *Times* complained that rather than making the police apolitical, the Act took police "from one political party and hand[ed] it over to another." More, the Attorney-General accurately prognosticated the Legislature disregarding his advice, and the population refusing to peaceably yield to the new Commissioners. "Black Republicans" were so named by the urban working classes due to the party's purported obsession with ending slavery. "Reforms of Our City Government," *New York Times* February 24th, 1857; *Harper's Weekly* March 28th 1857, 194; Strong, *Diary*, 342; *New York Tribune* April 13, 1857, 4; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 278-279.

would end up in New York's Supreme Court and attempting to shore up the bill's constitutionality, Albany passed a second bill draft in late February expanding into New York's surrounding counties. The expansion allowed Albany to argue that their bill, no longer restricted to New York County lines, lay within the jurisdiction of the State, and therefore did not violate the State Constitution. Republicans operated under the premise that New York's Municipal government was incapable of governing itself, forcing the State to implement controls on their behalf.²³⁹

In the face of staunch objection from many in New York City, the State Legislature passed the Metropolitan Police Act April 15th, 1857. Both New York and Albany understood that the law could not fully come into force until the legal battle was decided in the New York State Supreme Court and Court of Appeals, but in the interim both sides held fast. The Municipals were not disbanded, and with the creation of the Metropolitans, New York City was strapped with a unique situation until July 1857, policed by two simultaneous forces submitting to divergent leadership.²⁴⁰

Pragmatically speaking, Wood could not disband or give up the Municipals without a fight, for their patronage system represented the strongest base of power for one man rule. Giving up the Municipal force would not only cripple the power of the mayor's office, but enrage the working-class Irish officers filling the Municipal Department ranks. The partisan metropolitan force was naturally not interested in filling its ranks with former Municipals and loyal Shirtless Democrats. The mayor filled his required role as New York's public defender

²³⁹ The draft revision also altered the number of Commissioners to nine, seven appointed by the governor and filled out by the mayors of New York and Brooklyn as non-voting members. A later change settled on five commissioners, three from New York, but again with the mayors acting solely *ex officio*. *New York Times*, Feb 26th, 1857; *New York Herald*, April 16th, 17th, 1857; Mushkat, *Fernando Wood*, 70.

²⁴⁰ When the New York State Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the Metropolitan Police Act on May 25th, the case was immediately brought to the Court of Appeals, Mayor Wood's final legal resort. Schechter, *Devil's Own Work*, 66; Mushkat, *Fernando Wood*, 69-70; Richardson, *New York Police*, 101-2.

admirably. His rhetoric harkened back to Jacksonian ideals, fighting for the natural rights of the New York “sovereign people,” to determine their own representation by majority rule. As the people’s elected voice, Wood denounced “insolent” Albany for turning New York into a “subjugated city,” passing “outrageous” laws, and leaving its citizens in “a feeble state of vassalage as to be bereft of any voice in the selection of their own masters.”²⁴¹

In the courts, opponents to the Police Bill had a strong legal argument, certainly enough to see through due process. The Metropolitan Police Department, even with the inclusion of counties outside New York proper, were essentially a local force, yet posts were not elected or representative of the local population. Particularly in an era where individual liberty was dearly cherished and fiercely protected, many felt on principle that any law affecting a population should be forged by the citizens of that same population, not an enforced hegemony. Article X of the State Constitution supported this contention, and New York’s home rule depended on the Court’s agreement. If the act were upheld, Albany could create special districts for any purpose to undermine local governments. Wood himself said New York, “is indeed a conquered city,” should the Metropolitan Act pass through the courts intact.²⁴²

While New York, Albany, and their respective advocates debated the faults, righteousness, and legal implications of the Police Crisis, the reality on the streets was anarchy.²⁴³ Mayor Wood kept the Municipals undermanned and obfuscated at every turn. He

²⁴¹ Quoted in Mushkat, *Fernando Wood*, 72. See also, *New York Times*, “The Mayor versus The State,” June 1st, 1857, 4, for a dissenting view of Wood’s opinion espousing the totality of the rule of law.

²⁴² *New York Times* April 24th, 25th, 1857.

²⁴³ New York’s various papers naturally voiced variable opinions on the crisis from January to June. Some New York elites backed Wood’s position, if not the man, on the basis of Home Rule. Horace Greeley’s *Tribune* opposed Wood unequivocally, refusing even to admit that King’s appointments were unfairly partisan. *New York Tribune* April 17, 1857; the immigrant friendly *Irish-American* naturally backed their mayor, as did the *Herald*. As per “The Police Contest,” *Irish-American*, June 13th, 1857: “The police contest in New York is one unmitigated evil... because the contest was generated in false principles, is urged and sustained under fraudulent pretences, and is likely to leave behind it the seeds of pernicious doctrines and a depraved public opinion.” The Act “was born of suspicion, affected or real. It was jaundiced at its birth. It was swathed in scandal; and ever since, it has been nurtured on the pap of

refused to add new officers to the undermanned force now split between officers choosing either the Municipals or Metropolitans, and bolstered the number of loyal Democratic officers to a strong plurality by resurrecting two colonial-era charters. Council thus approved the 1200 man “Bureau of Day and Night Watch or Municipal Police,” whose rules and regulations carried over from the Municipal force. Lastly and of great importance, all police equipment, station houses, and the new police telegraph were all designated for exclusive use by the Municipals.²⁴⁴

Though the Metropolitan Act was under challenge, both police departments now held formal, if competing documentation for their existence, and police Captains and officers were forced to choose sides, knowing the incorrect temporary alliance could cost them their career as policemen. In total, before both sides filled vacancies, fifteen captains and roughly eight hundred old Municipal officers backed Wood, while seven captains and three hundred men joined the Metropolitans. As many predicted, the majority of policemen in the Auld Sixth sided with the mayor. After all, sixty-four percent of the district’s force was foreign-born.²⁴⁵

Splitting the police naturally led to increased lawlessness on the streets. Both forces fought over who had the right to serve writs and make arrests, often allowing criminals to slip away free or be outright released by the rival department. Two competing authorities, particularly attempting to rule over rowdy districts like Five Points and the Bowery, were no authority at all to the gangs of New York. The gangs were never less encumbered, and New

defamation.” *New York Herald*, April 17, 1857; the *Times* awaited the result of the court battle, believing most in the true application of the law over the partisanship they deplored over both sides, but prognosticated Wood’s defeat. *New York Times*, June 1st, 20th, 1857. Like the *Sun*, the *Times* disapproved of the MPA and its inception but withheld judgement on the new police until they saw the new Commissioners attempt real reform. Gibson, *Attitudes of the New York Irish*, 99.

²⁴⁴ Board member Tucker in dissent called stunting the force’s growth an “outrage.” “Municipal Affairs,” *New York Times*, May 22, 1857, 1; Richardson, *New York Police*, 102-103.

²⁴⁵ Over April and May 1857, “A Very Black Republican” published lists of the police captains and their political leanings to the *Times*, correctly identifying to which Department most would ally themselves. The weight of each officer and captain’s decision loomed large, for neither side was willing to allow neutrality or welcome back dissenters. *New York Times*, April 16th, 18th, 23rd, May 19th, 20th, 26th, 1857; George Washington Walling, *Recollections of a New York Chief of Police* (New York: Caxton, 1887), 50; Richardson, *New York Police*, 101-104; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 279.

York City endured a crime spree through the early summer. Ironically, the many reforms and even the addition of another police force to New York City, mostly rooted in attempts to quell the chaos of the gangs, had made matters far worse, not better. The *Times* predicted that this controversy, so long as it lasted, would leave New York City “completely at the mercy of the worst class of rowdies and ruffians who infest its streets.”²⁴⁶

The Breaking Point: A Summer of Riots

The crisis’ true breaking point came in June 1857, which began with the sudden death of Know Nothing Street Commissioner Joseph P. Taylor. While Taylor himself was unimportant, no more than one of the last vestiges of a dying party, his position technically oversaw police contracts and patronage appointments totalling roughly two million dollars. Whether King or Wood gained direct control of the newly open office would give Albany or New York a leg up in the Police Crisis, and so each claimed the right to appoint Taylor’s successor. King named faithful ally Daniel D. Conover, while Wood selected Charles Devlin. When neither side backed down, the matter reached flashpoint and caused the first open riot in New York’s 1857 Police Crisis.²⁴⁷

On June 16th, King’s appointee Daniel Conover ventured through lower Manhattan to City Hall, expecting to begin his term and take office. Taking the challenge quite literally, Wood during the work day allowed Conover into City Hall but not into the office appointed for New York’s Police Commissioner, before throwing Conover out of the building entirely during a

²⁴⁶ As an example of the futility of authority in a city patrolled by rival forces, new Metropolitan Captain George Walling attempted to arrest the mayor on a warrant from the embattled Recorder Smith “for blocking the appointment, for assault,” and, ironically, “for inciting a riot,” just before the Police Riot broke out on June 16th. Wood refused to recognise Walling as an officer or the legality of his Metropolitan force, and had the Municipals forcibly remove Walling from the building when the captain attempted the arrest singlehandedly. *New York Times* April 4 1857, 4; Walling, *Recollections*, 56-58; Mushkat, *Wood*, 73-74.

²⁴⁷ On June 10th and 11th, sources in the *Times* accused Wood of accepting a \$50,000 bribe from Devlin for the Commissioner’s post. *New York Times*, May 22nd, 1857; Mushkat, *Ibid*.

break in public hours. Conover left outraged and returned at noon marching down Chambers Street with a warrant for Wood's arrest, flanked by Coroner Perry, Captain Jacob Seabring and fifty metropolitan officers. Wood had made his own preparations, and the entourage of metropolitans were greeted at the steps of City Hall by at least five hundred municipal policemen, further flanked by a "miscellaneous assortment of suckers, soaplocks, Irishmen, and [P]lug [U]glies officiating in a guerrilla capacity," totalling roughly eight hundred strong yelling "Fernandy Wood!" and "Down with the Black Republicans!"²⁴⁸

Bravely or foolishly, the metropolitan escort charged the back entrance of City Hall on the orders of Recorder Smith to serve his warrants and "drag old Wood out of his hole!" Witnessed by a large crowd of observers, the Metropolitans were quickly flanked and enveloped by the far larger force. Over fifteen minutes, the Municipals brutally clubbed down the Metropolitans, though none fatally, and in the chaos between "preservers of the peace," Wood's forces appeared to win the day. As George Matsell delivered to Wood, "Mr. Mayor, the Metropolitans came and we've beat them off."²⁴⁹

Fortuitously for the Metropolitans, if not for New York's home rule, the New York State Militia's Seventh Regiment happened to be in the city June 16th, parading down Broadway in preparation to embark for Boston. The commanding officer General Sanford and his Regiment came to the aid of the Metropolitans, arrested Wood without further violence, and added inciting a riot to the charges against him. The Municipals and rowdies of lower Manhattan were certainly a formidable force, but were no match for an armed and trained Regiment.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁸ *Irish-American*, "War in the Metropolis!" June 17th, 1857; *New York Times* June 17th, 1857; Strong, *Diary* II, 342-343.

²⁴⁹ *Irish-American*, Ibid. Walling, *Recollections*, 59-60; Lue, "Riot in City Hall Park," June 18th, 1857, New York Municipal Archives, New York, New York.

²⁵⁰ Metropolitans officers injured in the Police Riot also filed suit against Mayor Wood. The judgements succeeded, winning \$250 each plus costs, totalling \$13,000. Ever stubborn, Wood never paid, and claimed only the Municipals under his command had prevented property destruction and further blood in the streets. George Templeton Strong

The Police Riot generated plenty of headlines and even some poetry, but solved little.²⁵¹ The Metropolitans reasserted themselves in the city, but any progress was contingent on the awaited constitutionality ruling by New York's Court of Appeals. Even in defeat, Mayor Wood found ways to manoeuvre his release the same day as his arrest via a friendly judge and used the papers to defend his actions against the Republican "usurpers." Despite the rhetoric, on June 17th, Wood and King agreed that to curb further chaos, both Police Departments would jointly patrol New York until the legal ruling came down. Depending on one's perspective, the Police Riot represented the Mayor's honourable and unflinching defence of Home Rule, or yet another blight in New York's reputation for corruption and disorder.²⁵²

Regardless, the image of Wood as "Model Mayor" was irrevocably destroyed. In a single afternoon, the mayor very publicly twisted the law for his own means, incited and encouraged collective violence on the very steps of government, then escaped on bail and through friendly judicial contacts when defeated in the very riot he helped create. The mayor proved his effectiveness and creativity as a politician to escape legal culpability, but in the process simultaneously proved himself no more than a direct descendant of the Shirtless Democrats and other New York gang leaders.

responded in his diary that Wood was "an egregious demagogue and scoundrel," however accepting "that his opponents are nearly as bad." The city ended up very gradually paying both damages and costs out of the tax levy, a process which took until 1862 to complete. *New York Times* December 11th, 16th, 1862; Strong, *Diary*, 342-345; Walling, *Recollections*, 60-61; Richardson, *New York Police*, 105, 303.

²⁵¹ For detailed reports on the initiating incidents and progression of the riot, see the *Times*, *Tribune*, and *Irish-American*, "War in the Metropolis!" June 17th, 1857. For an example of art inspired by the riot, see the leaflet poem "Riot in the City Hall Park," by Lue, New York Municipal Archives, New York, New York. Published two days after the riot of a printer on 38 Chatham Street, the narrative describes a fictionalised lead up and early phase of the riot from the perspective of a Five Pointer to the rhythm of contemporary hit song "Air" by Old Dan Tucker.

²⁵² Wood was released on a pre-arranged \$50,000 bail by Justice Hoffman, who was unaware of all the new warrants drawn up by Recorder Smith. The mayor's plea as a "law-abiding and order-loving citizen" was accepted, and the case dismissed. The *Times* felt the mayor's statement "exceeds in its monstrous impudence everything that has before proceeded from him." The *Herald* praised the mayor and revelled that his municipals had "signally defeated" the "Black Republican" metropolitans. As a final interesting legal aside, the debate over who could legally appoint New York's Commissioner wasn't settled until 1858 – in Wood's favour. *Sun*, June 19th, 1857; *New York Times*, June 19th, 1857, April 21st, 1858; *New York Herald*, June 17th, 1857; Mushkat, *Wood*, 75; Richardson, *New York Police*, 105-106.

On July 2nd, the Court of Appeals submitted their decision. Though the majority of the judges were Democrats, the court upheld the Metropolitan Act by a vote of six to two. In the majority statement, Chief Justice Denio concurred with New York's attorney general, "if the provisions of the statute had been limited territorially to the city of New-York, it would have been in conflict with the section of the constitution so often referred to [Article X, Section 2]." The constitution, however, had no provision preventing new special districts from being created. Moreover, the state is within its rights to maintain order in all areas throughout the state itself. As such, the legislature, and only the legislature, could determine the need for legislative action to better protect law and order within the state. In his conclusion, Denio allowed Albany the legal benefit of the doubt,

It is not impossible to suppose that there might be adequate public motives for the consolidation of the police force of the four counties. If such motives could in the nature of things exist, we are to assume for the purposes of this question, that they did exist.²⁵³

Justice Shankland strongly concurred with the majority's ruling in his statement, emphasising the State's responsibility to protect life and property. Since crime statistics suggested the city of New York could not handle these tasks, the state was obligated to step in. The two dissenting opinions from Justices Brown and Comstock were based on the Metropolitan Act depriving the people of New York City from choosing their own local officers, particularly since at the time, "a state police is a thing unknown and alien to our system."²⁵⁴

In the grand scheme of things, Albany's partisanship did not matter to the Court of Appeals. New York's police force, among a number of other civic organisations, direly required reform. The Metropolitan Act was hardly perfect, but it began to fill the needs of New York's

²⁵³ Richardson, *New York Police*, 106-107.

²⁵⁴ Ibid, 106-108.

citizens and government, whether or not New York's citizens and government approved. Out of options and under direct orders, Wood formally dissolved the Municipals the next day.²⁵⁵

The political game was over, but politics and the rule of law did not speak for the streets of Five Points. Dissolving the Municipals outright left jobless over one thousand angry, physical, and rowdy young men without even their previous month's wages. New liquor excise laws were to take effect the very next day, closing the saloons on what was always a raucous Independence Day weekend. Panicked reports circulated that the Metropolitans refused to appoint Irishmen to the force unless they were Republican, and that a Know Nothing attack on the Transfiguration Church on Mott Street was imminent. All the factors were in place for a large, deadly, and imminent riot. The shifting governmentality handed down by Republicans struck straight into the heart of Five Points' generationally ingrained cultural identity, and stripped their capacity for Home Rule. With no legal measures left open to Five Points, the traditions of collective violence were bound to exert themselves.²⁵⁶

On July 4th, less than forty-eight hours after the Police Act verdict, a riot exceeding even the gravest predictions erupted in Cow Bay at the heart of Five Points and spread through the sixth, seventh, and thirteenth wards. Best titled the Bowery Boys Riot, the chaos lasted two days and evenings, from one o'clock in the morning on the 4th to eight o'clock in the evening on the 5th, in fits and spurts of collective violence. The details of each attack, retreat, and fatality are too numerous to warrant a detailed narrative in this account, but in total, official casualties listed

²⁵⁵ Wood made repeated unsuccessful attempts to repeal the law in the years after the 1857 ruling. His conduct as part of the Metropolitan Board became a large enough distraction that in 1860 the state legislature removed the mayors of New York and Brooklyn from the board altogether. For greater detail on the Court of Appeals ruling and legal analysis, see *New York Times*, "The Metropolitan Police Act," and "The Decision of the Court of Appeals in the Metropolitan Police Bill," July 3rd, 1857; Pleasants, *Fernando Wood*, 83; Richardson, *New York Police*, 106-108.

²⁵⁶ A number of ex officers blamed Wood specifically for their woes, suing the mayor for their Municipal pay. Rietano, *Restless City*, 67; Richardson, *New York Police*, viii, 107-108; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 280.

twelve dead and thirty-seven wounded, the deadliest New York riot of its time short of Astor House.²⁵⁷

The inciting incident for the Bowery Boys Riot would have, under the singular authority of the Municipal Police, gone no further than an arrest over two rowdies street fighting on the corner of Mulberry and Chatham Streets at one in the morning on the fourth. Instead, since the arresting officer was a metropolitan, an entire mob of Five Pointers attacked and fatally beat the policeman with stones, shouting “Kill the God damned Black Metropolitan son of a bitch!”²⁵⁸ Five Points gangsters, regardless of their affiliation, harboured no lost love for metropolitan officers. The officers, many of them Albany favourites, quickly found themselves under attack because the rounds they walked had been the responsibilities of a Know Nothing or Irishman just days prior. Municipals were respected in their communities and had patrolled in the same neighbourhoods they inhabited, while the Metropolitans were outsiders and enemies, attacked by rowdies out of anger, spite, and hopelessness. Riots are born from ongoing conditions of mass dissatisfaction in a community, and Five Points had much to be frustrated over.

The belligerent gangs were led by Irish fire chief, saloonkeeper and police court justice Matthew Brennan on one front, whose forces were most often called the “Roach Guard” or “Dead Rabbits” in the press. On the other side was an unlikely combination of James Kerrigan and Pat Mathew’s Bowery Boys. When the patrolling Metropolitans were routed from Five Points within an hour, the Department initially held a significant force at the White Street

²⁵⁷ The official casualty and wounded list were probably only around a third of the true total, by modern estimations, due to the habit for residents of Five Points and the Bowery to bury their own dead and not report injuries to the police. Of most of the public fatalities, most appeared to be women and children indirectly involved with the riot. Though in 1849 the Astor Place Riot resulted in more official fatalities at twenty, most of those came from when the military fired upon the crowd. In New York’s history, only during the 1863 Draft Riots have more New Yorkers taken the lives of fellow citizens. *New York Times*, “Rioting and Bloodshed,” August 6th, 1857; “A Version of the Dead Rabbit Riot,” August 13th, 1857; Asbury, *Gangs of New York*, 102-106; English, *Paddy Whacked*, 27-28; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 289-290.

²⁵⁸ The officer died of his wounds several days later. *New York Times*, July 11th, 13th, 1857; Asbury, *Gangs of New York*, 102-107; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 280-281.

headquarters. They hesitated to return or attempt to restore order for a number of reasons. The police were left without the resources of Municipals, from station houses to the new telegraph, which Wood had yet to turn over in the transition. More, the metropolitan force was hardly the seasoned brawling force the Municipals has been. Fearful and handicapped, the Municipals may not have been able to put down the mob in Five Points, and decided instead to protect the armoury uptown. Finally, to be explained further later, the Bowery Boys and Roach Guard began fighting each other over invaded territory, and it was hoped the violence would quell itself in short order, mitigating risks to a vulnerable police force.²⁵⁹

After violence paused overnight, the *Times* described the scene of the July 5th as abject chaos:

Brick-bats, stones and clubs were flying thickly around, and from the windows in all directions, and the men ran wildly about brandishing firearms. Wounded men lay on the sidewalks and were trampled upon. Now the Rabbits would make a combined rush and force their antagonists up Bayard Street to the Bowery. Then the fugitives, being reinforced, would turn on their pursuers and compel a retreat to Mulberry, Elizabeth and Baxter streets.²⁶⁰

Hundreds fought on both sides, mainly around a barricade on Bayard Street, including Irish women and children throwing a “shower of stone, bricks, oyster-shells, fragments of ironware, and in some instances pots and kettles” down from tenement windows onto the Bowery Boys and Police below. When an organised police force finally did arrive supported by the militia on the second day, they advanced on gangsters from both sides with clubs, chasing rioters off the streets and right into the tenements to halt the raining down of bricks from apartment windows

²⁵⁹ Wood only turned over the police property in mid-July after ordered to by Common Council. Richardson, *New York Police*, 109, 111; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 282-284.

²⁶⁰ *New York Times*, “The City Under Arms,” July 6th, 1857.

and roofs. Leading the Militia-reinforced police charge was none other than General Charles W. Sanford, but progress remained hard to come by.²⁶¹

The Police bill gave entire communities in lower Manhattan reason to unite and resist, led by the gangs. The demonization and degradation of anyone not supporting the bill expedited this process. State Republicans referred to the population of Five Points in terms familiar to those descriptions seen in moralist and slumming narratives, as “criminal and wilful knaves, or at least the unscrupulous abettors of scoundrelism.” Legitimately concerned citizens of Five Points became lumped in with the rowdies, called thieves, liars, ruffians, and other epithets. As a result, the objectors and the radicals found common moral ground, which swelled their numbers. When legitimate voices of dissent are silenced or ignored, those same voices become far more dangerous. As the *Irish-American* put it while discussing the bill, “Once it transgresses the laws of honor, and decorum and truth, there is no law of which it is in the least afraid.”²⁶²

One of the riot’s most dramatic scenes occurred very near to its conclusion. At seven in the evening on the second night of rioting, city authorities, in desperation to restore order, asked legendary Captain Isaiah Rynders to calm the crowd and put a definitive end to the riot. Full of confidence and his usual gusto Rynders climbed to the top of the barricade blocking Baxter Street and yelled out, “I implore you to end this carnage. You are killing each other for what purpose? To what end?” Five Points did not comply. Tired of an outsider holding power in their neighbourhoods, the Irish shot and threw projectiles at Rynders, chasing him away. As if further proving that the Irish community controlled Five Points, and no other, the riot quietly ended on its own accord an hour later. The Captain never again forayed in Sixth Ward politics, was no

²⁶¹ Sanford, whose forces put down the Police Riot days earlier, became a veteran in combating New York mobs over his career, including the Draft Riots in 1863. *New York Tribune*, July 7th, 1857; *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, July 18th, 1857, 109; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 282-283; English, *Paddy Whacked*, 28.

²⁶² “The Police Contest,” *Irish-American* June 13 1857.

longer considered a major underworld figure in Manhattan. In his place rose community approved men like John Morrissey, James Kerrigan and Pat Mathews.²⁶³

Statistics show the Bowery Boys Riot was New York's largest and deadliest conflict of 1857, but it was not the last. Less than two weeks later, the nearby German dominated *Kleindeutschland* Seventeenth Ward on the lower East side bordering the Bowery rioted for three days. The unrest was brutally suppressed by police, though less fatal than the Bowery Boys Riot. Later in the summer, Sequine's Point quarantine on Staten Island was attacked by a mob, and the police utilized artillery in putting down the crowd. New York's rowdies, regardless of native or immigrant ties, did not respect the new metropolitan police authority, and smaller acts of interpersonal violence broke into larger episodes of collective violence even after the legal resolution to the police crisis.²⁶⁴

The police system Republicans took over and subverted for their own ends was inspired by Fernando Wood's politics. Wood himself learned his tactics from the political clubs and gangs of New York. The gangs, through their triumphs through the 1830s to 1850s, taught politicians that a democratic plurality was not actually a requirement for rule. In New York City, rule could be earned with extreme partisanship when placed in the hands of radicals willing to do anything as a means to their end. While the Metropolitan Police Act became the Republican

²⁶³ Rynders was at the time looking to break into Tammany through the Auld Sixth, but quickly found the incredible influence he held in the 1840s was a shell of its former levels. *New York Times* and *New York Tribune*, July 6th, 1857; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 283, 288-289, 144.

²⁶⁴ Thousands of Germans participated in the *Kleindeutschland* riot over bread and saloon closings. As yet another demonstration for the public's support of violent resistance, a funeral procession down Broadway for a German blacksmith killed in the riot drew ten thousand people. It was headed by a banner in German translated to "Victim of the Metropolitan Police." A running narrative of the *Kleindeutschland Riots* can be found in the *New York Times*, July 9th to 15th, 1857; Richardson, *New York Police*, 110; Schechter, *Devil's Own Work*, 68.

rubric to increase their power in New York State and govern New York City by “saving” the populace from themselves, the concepts behind the act were not new to the city.²⁶⁵

Following the riots, New York’s Metropolitan Police Department represented a political minority so unpopular that the Commissioner struggled through the rest of 1857 to find appointees willing to fill out the Department’s rank and file. On the wealthy Republican Broadway strip, policing was not a desired profession. Staff shortages left many stationhouses shorthanded in 1857, with only 760 patrolmen altogether, and captained by experienced officers in only seven out of twenty-two precincts.²⁶⁶

The ongoing violence in New York City helped push the Police and Bowery Boys Riots out of the papers with less analysis than they deserved. The majority of fatalities appear to have been Irish, but little was written about the known victims. After several weeks, only six men were indicted for rioting, again all with Irish names, the details of their cases scarcely mentioned in the papers, and in one instance unavailable altogether.²⁶⁷ Penny presses and competitive newspapers always focused on new outrages and shock value to sell papers, rather than covering the follow up of past crises. Additionally, the papers exhibited poor reliability describing the riots. For example, the main Five Points gang involved in the July 4th and 5th riots were Roach or Roche Guard, but most papers mistook their members for a gang dubbed the “Dead Rabbits,”

²⁶⁵ The Metropolitan Police existed from 1857 to 1870. The entirety of their existence was defined by continued or increased partisan reign over city services. Political control over the police department, and thus the election machinery, consistently proved too difficult for the ruling party to overcome in attempts at nonpartisan reorganisation. Richardson, *New York Police*, 108-109.

²⁶⁶ It took an entire year for the Metropolitans to finally number the 1,100 of the old Municipal force. A further compromise allowed all old Municipals officers to regain appointment eligibility, and giving back pay for officers if they had not been part of Wood’s “Night and Day Watch.” This slowly grew the police to a more effective 1,500 men within another 12 months. Ibid, 111-113.

²⁶⁷ The trials made minor headlines because well known sporting man and Councilman John Clancy argued on the rioters’ behalf. Statements of the accused before the justice, save for Owen Gilmartin who (shrewdly) requested a jury trial, can be found in the New York Corner Inquests, 89, New York Municipal Archives, New York, New York; *New York Times*, “Law Intelligence,” July 8th, 10th, 13th, 17th, Anbinder, *Five Points*, 291-292.

which Five Pointers claimed did not even exist. The Dead Rabbit name may have actually been a pejorative assigned to Five Points gangs by the Bowery Boys.²⁶⁸

Historiographically, the Police Crisis and Bowery Boys Riot, in addition to suffering from poor terminology, have been portrayed as a battle between the Irish and Nativists.²⁶⁹ Yet Tyler Anbinder's dissection points to "recognising the riot as an intraethnic rather interethnic battle," since Bowery Boy leader Pat Mathews was Irish-born with a Catholic background, and James Kerrigan, a rival to Mathews since the 1856 election, was a native New Yorker with a strong Catholic loyalty.²⁷⁰ Both groups of belligerents in the Police Crisis had many members with Irish backgrounds, but none fought over Irish issues. The riots, clearly tied to the politics of New York City and State, took precedent over old nationalities.

The famine-era New York Irish, through all their difficulties, were thus by the late-1850s best culturally indentified as a distinct New York subculture than anything else. The Bowery Boy Riot was initiated out of systemic frustration with declining opportunities and power for the New York Irish in lower Manhattan, specifically in the Police Department. These same factors, combined with Fernando Wood weakening the Metropolitans and dismissing the Municipals without pay, helped increase the riot's severity.

But one more factor, an old fashioned turf battle, fed the riot's chaos over Independence Day weekend, 1857. Kerrigan told the *Tribune* that his forces by chasing the Metropolitans into

²⁶⁸ As examples of inaccurate and biased reporting, each of the *Times*, *Frank Leslie's*, and *Tribune* riot narratives were clearly written with consultation from the Bowery Boys. In addition to there being no proven "Dead Rabbits" gang, the sketches of Bowery Boys are far more becoming than those of the Roach Guard, and *Frank Leslie's* narrative even includes a black humour anecdote where a bumbling "Dead Rabbit" jumps out into the open, misfires his musket, and falls before being shot dead. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, July 18th, 1857, 109; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 284-286.

²⁶⁹ See, for instance Joel Tyler Headley, *Pen and Pencil Sketches of the Great Riots* (New York: E.B. Treat, 1877), 131-135; or for a more contemporary example, Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 839.

²⁷⁰ A strong possibility is that more famous New York gang leaders like Isaiah Rynders and Bill Poole, who both held fierce anti-Irish and anti-Catholic xenophobic views, confused outsiders into believing all Bowery Boys were Know Nothings. In truth the views of the gangs fluctuated with their leadership. Anbinder, *Five Points*, 290-291.

the Bowery had crossed onto “forbidden ground, the Bowery Boys claiming exclusive control over that part of the Ward.”²⁷¹ Early in the riot, a Five Points mob chased metropolitan Abraham Florentine Jr., a native-born thirty-year-old with connections to both the Know Nothing and Republicans, from just North of Baynard Street into the saloon at 40 Bowery, home to the Mathews band of Bowery Boys. While the adherents of Brennan, Mathews, and Kerrigan would have all hated Florentine, the fact that Brennan’s followers had violently entered the Bowery and attacked Mathew’s saloon to reach their target took precedence. Mathew’s men defended their saloon and the metropolitan within it, as did Kerrigan’s under similar circumstances on nearby Elizabeth Street. Additionally, the Bowery Boys needed to respond with their own attack, because in the mindset of gang subculture, if Brennan’s men “could lick the Bowery men they would have all of the 6th ward.”²⁷² Politics of the Ward were more important than anything else.

Conclusion: The End of B’hoy Culture

Though great men and unstoppable forces changed the world around the Auld Sixth, the mindset of its rowdies remained disastrously insular. Lawyer, politician and diarist Richard Henry Dana, Jr. met with “one of the more respectable Irishmen” involved in the Bowery Boys Riot, and recorded their conversation in his journal. The Five Pointer claimed the riot began because “the New police could not go into the 6th Ward, – that the men of the 6th Ward had vowed to kill them all, if they came there.” Dana reminded his subject that the Metropolitans were backed by State authority, to which the man firmly responded, “the Sixth Ward, sir, is the strongest power on earth.” He repeated this, to ensure Dana knew he believed it.²⁷³

²⁷¹ *New York Tribune*, July 6th, 1857.

²⁷² Quote from James Kerrigan. *New York Tribune*, July 6th, 1857; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 280-284, 291-292.

²⁷³ Richard Henry Dana Jr., *The Journal of Richard Henry Dana, Jr.* ed. Robert F. Lucid (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1968), Vol. 2: 824-825; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 291-292.

From one perspective, the views of Dana's Irish subject were justifiable. For almost a generation, the Sixth Ward had been notoriously violent, extreme, and politically influential. The district's physical degradation and lawlessness only added to its notoriety. The insular worldviews of Five Pointers had strengthened feelings of belonging for a transplanted society and defended the community against Know Nothing aggressors.

Yet Five Points and the Bowery's failure to unify when required ultimately ushered in irrelevance for both subcultures. Acquiescing to Fernando Wood's authority of assured patronage brought a key element of the police tradition, local agency, out of Five Points' hands even prior to the Metropolitan Police Act. Bowery Boys defending metropolitan officers against Five Pointers undermined any unified show of resistance. With greater regulation and higher authority creeping into New York's saloons, fire halls, and voting booths, the role of street-level politics declined and much of the Shirtless Democracy's *raison d'être* eroded away by the Civil War. In the grand context, the Gangs of New York lost the most of what mattered to them, their independence. Whether under the wing of Fernando Wood and Tammany Hall, or subjected to the will of Republican rule of law, the rowdies of Auld Sixth no longer controlled their own niche. Even the Shirtless Democracy, chaotic by its very nature, submitted to civic ordering under the unstoppable tide of modernisation and reform.²⁷⁴

While the idea of the B'hoys faded away, and the political power of Five Points was dealt a savage blow, many of New York's underworld figures found paths to success.²⁷⁵ John Morrissey became one of America's first Irish mob bosses, overseeing a gambling empire which

²⁷⁴ After the Civil War, New York's gangs, most prominently a new group named the Whyos, shifted away from politics and deeper into crime for profit, targeting anyone and ranging from assault and extortion to murder for hire. See Asbury, *Gangs of New York*, Chapter IX, "When New York really was Wicked."

²⁷⁵ The Bowery Boy would barely survive to see the Civil War, making it a memorable but fleeting phenomenon. Sporting men became less renowned, but survived into the early twentieth century and influenced the bravado of depression era gangsters. Anbinder, *Five Points*, 181.

began in the saloons and dens of lower Manhattan before expanding clear across New England. Back in New York, Brennan became so popular as a police justice that he ran unopposed in the 1857 election, and the next year his associates Joseph Dowling and John Clancy became the Sixth Ward police captain and county clerk, respectably. Apparently brokering a truce between old Sports, Kerrigan served as a clerk in Brennan's court, and was eventually elected to Congress. Despite New York City's Irish community losing mass patronage in the Municipal police, other avenues for advancement opened, and Irish leaders frequently seized these opportunities.²⁷⁶

Fernando Wood after an embattled year capped off by a financial crisis was defeated in his next attempt at re-election, but returned to the Mayor's office by 1860, and soon thereafter became an influential Democrat in the United States House of Representatives. Wood and many other Democrats continually tried to repeal and subvert the Metropolitan Police Act, though no attempt came near as close as the July 1857 Court of Appeals decision. As for Wood's legacy in New York, one man rule turned into New York's "Boss" system of political machine rule, most famously dominated by William Tweed.²⁷⁷

Mike Walsh's era of direct popular action was at an end. New York City was in the midst of vast changes to both its physical infrastructure and ruling governmentality. Political manoeuvring was becoming more technical, more scrutinised, and acts of directed violence could no longer be a standard problem solving approach. Walsh had seen his political career end unceremoniously after rival John Kelly reportedly threatened to examine Walsh's citizenship, and true to Walsh's violent life, he met a violent end. Around four in the morning, March 17th, 1859, just two hours after leaving the saloon on Saint Patrick's Day night, a policeman

²⁷⁶ English, *Paddy Whacked*, 28-30. Anbinder, *Five Points*, 293-295.

²⁷⁷ Wood's political rebirth is detailed in later chapters of this same work. Mushkat, *Fernando Wood*, 68-71, 113-114, 118.

discovered Walsh face down in an Eighth Avenue alleyway. The body had a strike wound to the head and was stripped of a gold watch and diamond ring. Contemporary presses speculated that the death was a murder, but it was never proven.²⁷⁸

The once thriving underworld political clubs falling into insignificance marked the end of the Shirtless Democracy. Mirroring the life and death of community leader Mike Walsh, political clubs with community roots became the victims of their own success. After a generation, Republican pushes for modernisation and the necessity of the rule of law eliminated the impetus for bands of political rowdies. Ideals from the era nevertheless survive. American individualism, along with Thoreau's argument for civil disobedience, influences dissenters and government officials alike today as much as ever.²⁷⁹ The tale of New York's antebellum radicals had often been ignored or misrepresented in American historiography as irrelevant or unworthy of analysis. Yet a depth of analysis can be used to explain how and why riots occur, and thus find order in America's chaotic history.

²⁷⁸ It seems very likely that Walsh was never actually an American citizen, making him the only foreign national to ever serve in the United States House of Representatives. Kelly had just won a tightly contested election against Walsh, and when the latter seemed primed to challenge the results, Kelly made inquiries into Walsh's citizenship. Walsh immediately retreated, suggesting the rumours were probably true. Adams, *Bowery Boys*, 129-130.

²⁷⁹ The opening salvo of *Civil Disobedience*, "That government is best which governs not at all," could be the official motto of today's GOP.

Conclusion

The journey towards this thesis was initially influenced by a scholarly interest in collective resistance and collective violence. Specifically, I was interested in how properly contextualising extra-legal actions could make something as apparently senseless as violence suddenly understandable. The path to understanding Bowery B'hoy culture, Irish-Americans, and antebellum New York City, however, was a winding one. The influences I felt drive my research into this subject may inform readers as to my own biases and strengths, and I will discuss these factors briefly here.

A number of other academic topics piqued my curiosity before arriving at the 1857 riots as a key area of research for this study. During my undergraduate degree, Professor Susan Smith's history of medicine and warfare seminar introduced the idea that destruction often births progress, as seen in advances in prosthetics during the American Civil War or breakthroughs in energy as a result of the atomic era. Around the same time, Sharon Romeo's course on women's history in the United States fostered my enthusiasm for uncovering the spirit of often overlooked or oppressed communities. When Professor Romeo became my graduate supervisor, I was further drawn to the antebellum era by her influence as a 19th century American historian.

The thesis' original research goal was not actually B'hoy culture or the 1857 riots, but a re-examination of the 1863 New York City draft riots. Due to the size, duration, and severity of the 1863 riots, they have worthily attracted a significant amount of academic attention.²⁸⁰

Through these texts, many aspects of the riot and why it occurred are well established historiographically. My own interests, however, involved delving into an area overlooked by the

²⁸⁰ Important scholarly works on the 1863 riots include Joel Tyler Headley, *Pen and Pencil Sketches of the Great Riots* (New York: E.B. Treat, 1877); William Osborne Stoddard, *The Volcano Under the City, By a Volunteer Special* (New York: Fords, Howard and Hulbert, 1887); Barnett Schecter, *The Devil's Own Work: The Civil War Draft Riots and the Fight to Reconstruct America* (New York: Walker & Company, 2005); and most the most seminal, Iver Bernstein, *The New York City Draft Riots: Their Significance for American Society and Politics in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

current historiography of American violence and collective action. After further research, the summer of 1857, particularly the Police Riot and Bowery Boys Riot, presented themselves as fascinating avenues for new research. I was interested in exploring these events on a grassroots level from the lens least considered; in this case, from the perspective of the contemporary Irish-American community and culture in lower Manhattan.

During the first semester of this graduate degree, I found the cultural theory and historiography course taught by Professor Dennis Sweeney vitally important to my thesis because it developed my understanding of how New York City's Irish-American community could be academically approached and understood. Two works studied in the course stand out for the ways they influenced my research. Carlos Ginzberg's *The Cheese and the Worms: The Life of a Seventeenth Century Miller* gave me a strong understanding of cultural anthropology as a research technique, which became the way forward, along with a significant amount of source mining, in the approach to my work.²⁸¹ This was bolstered by Robert Darnton's *The Great Cat Massacre*, which again used cultural anthropology to make the alien suddenly understandable, in Darnton's case the murder of master craftsmen's cats by apprentice printers in mid-18th century Paris.²⁸² These works and the approach of cultural anthropology eventually dictated the structure of this thesis. That is, if one is to understand the New York City's 1857 riots at all, they must first understand the city's antebellum Irish-American community.

Under this approach, the 1857 Police and Bowery Boy riots, though important, are actually not the primary element of this study. This thesis instead focuses primarily on New York City's Irish-American community and their path to the riots. In the process, it tells the story of an

²⁸¹ Carlo Ginzberg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

²⁸² Robert Darnton, "Worker's Revolt: The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint-Severin." in *The Great Cat Massacre and other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 75-106.

entire antebellum subculture: the origins, rise, and fall of the political proto-gangster. Chapter one examines Irish-American community formation in Five Points, New York City during the famine era to uncover the roots of a rowdy subculture, namely traditions of fiercely insular community thought and resistance against authority. Chapter two examines Irish-American involvement in New York City's rowdy B'hoy subculture: how community traditions from the famine generations turned into extralegal activity, how independent political clubs flourished in this environment, and how also transitions to the politics of rough justice were seamless and communally acceptable. The final chapter traces the fall of grassroots political rowdies in Five Points, whose chaos could not reign indefinitely. The 1857 riots are therefore explained as a final nail in the coffin of the B'hoy subculture: the last gasps of a dying group.

Prior to my research into antebellum Five Points, I expected to find greater links between other eras, regions, and acts of collective violence in American history. Instead, this thesis primarily describes a distinct microhistory of American urban violence. There are no significant links, for instance, between the 1857 riots of this thesis and the 1863 draft riots: the B'hoy subculture of the former no longer even existed by the middle of the Civil War. Even national narratives such as slavery had minimal impact on the events I examine. Though slavery created political factionalism within the Democratic Party, which in turn helped New York City's antebellum gang's thrive, Five Pointers cared far more about the current events of their own neighbourhood than about what was happening in the American South.

The larger narratives drawn from this thesis are less expected and more universal. They include how poverty and xenophobia breed crime and resistance, how the oppressed can find ways exhibit agency when given the opportunity, how acts of collective violence are so often directed political acts, how structured governmental ordering eventually takes over from even

institutionalised chaos, and how riots express the discontented voice of an entire community. Still, the narratives of the thesis remain locally constrained to Antebellum Five Points and the Bowery. This is a testament to the complexities of community and culture: it takes two whole chapters of community context to understand why the political crisis of 1857 caused such violence.

There remain a number of paths forward for future research from this work. How gendered, for instance, is this study? The gendered make-up of the gangs was overwhelmingly male, but Irish-American community traditions included a family economy. Further, reports on the Bowery Boy Riot included the participation of Five Points women and children. Just how separate could the politics of the saloons and fire halls be from the politics of the tenements when B'hoy politics were rooted in the approval of one's neighbours?

Also, how were the Irish-Americans, particularly New York City's political bands of the 1840s and 1850s, perceived by themselves and others racially? The Know Nothing movement certainly represented a blowback to the advancement of a perceived "other," culturally, racially, or otherwise. Still, the American-Irish were one of the first groups in American history to engage with different constructions of "whiteness," and this study spends precious little time examining that engagement through the lens of groups such as the Empire Club, Spartan Band or Roche Guard.

Finally, how legally attuned were these political proto-gangsters? In the decades at the height of collective political extralegal action, surely these rowdies grew incredibly familiar with the criminal justice systems of their era. Many crimes carried the risk of capital punishment, but others such as Mike Walsh's shortened libel term or the maximum six months for a rioting conviction, appear short enough to bear as part of the proto-gangster lifestyle. Historian

Elizabeth Dale recently published a sweeping survey of American criminal justice from the late eighteenth through the early twentieth century, an excellent foundation for more detailed studies which includes the difficulties legal reformers encountered with juries who valued rough communal justice over the rule of law.²⁸³ The historiography of B'hoy culture would certainly benefit from an examination of this nature centred on and around antebellum Five Points. As a final product, I hope this thesis offers a small contribution to the growing historiography of American violence as a microhistory of Five Points in the antebellum era.

²⁸³ Elizabeth Dale, *Criminal Justice in the United States, 1789-1939* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University, 2011).

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