

months and sometimes years without work and watching friends and family starve before their eyes. The Irish did not come to Five Points expecting streets paved with gold. They simply wanted work—work that would enable them both to feed their families and to put a little something away so that someday, their children could have a better life.

## 3

## PROLOGUE

“THE WICKEDEST HOUSE ON THE  
WICKEDEST STREET THAT EVER EXISTED”

IF FIVE POINTS as a whole was infamous for its depravity, one of its buildings in particular became ground zero for wretchedness. Here is the story of the “Old Brewery,” the most repulsive building of its day, a vast dark cave, a black hole into which every urban nightmare and unspeakable fear could be projected.

In the Old Brewery, Americans believed, lived the worst of Five Points’ population—its most hardened criminals and destitute paupers. “No language can exaggerate its filth or the degradation of its inmates,” insisted Five Points’ Methodist missionaries. “Here is vice at its lowest ebb,” agreed the *National Police Gazette*, “a crawling and fetid vice, a vice of rags and filth.” Solon Robinson, a reporter for the more respectable *Tribune*, concurred with the scandal sheet’s assessment, stating that “every room was a brothel or a den of thieves, or both combined.” In short, concluded the *Police Gazette*, the Old Brewery was “the wickedest house on the wickedest street that ever existed in New York, yes, and in all the country and possibly all the world.”<sup>1</sup>

As its name suggests, the Old Brewery had once produced beer, one of the many manufactories established in the eighteenth century by the shores of the Collect Pond to make use of its supply of fresh, pure water. Owned by the Coulthardt family, the brewery continued to brew beer until about 1837, when it was converted into a tenement. As part of the conversion process, the high-ceilinged floor that held the brew vats was divided in two, leaving four stories in all. Few residential buildings in antebellum New York were even half the size of the Old Brewery. Because the struc-

ture was so wide (it covered both 59 and 61 Cross Street) and so deep (it stretched back from the street at least one hundred feet on its irregular lot), it was filled with windowless apartments and pitch black, labyrinthine hallways. As a result, only the poorest Five Pointers seeking the cheapest rents took apartments there, creating a tenement so repulsive that it quickly became the most infamous in New York, "famed in song and story."<sup>2</sup>

The supposed depravities of the Old Brewery have taken on mythic proportions. In the 1920s, Herbert Asbury, a usually careful if somewhat overly dramatic chronicler of old New York, depicted the building as a Sodom reborn:

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 walls could be heard the crashing thud of 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 tremens. Murders were frequent; it has been estimated that for almost fifteen years the Old Brewery averaged a murder a night.

When demolition crews eventually tore down the Old Brewery, insisted Asbury, the wreckers "carried out several sacks filled with human bones which they had found between the walls and in the cellars, and night after night gangsters thronged the ruin searching for treasure which rumor had it was buried there." A contemporary maintained that "the old brewer of all the world's misery, the Evil One himself, has dominion there at this day."<sup>3</sup>

Could the Old Brewery really have been this bad? The tenement certainly was crowded and most of its apartments were filthy. In 1850, the *New York Tribune* found two and sometimes four families occupying single rooms in some of its basement apartments. Another eyewitness

account described walls "once plastered, but now half the wall [falling] off, in some places mended by pasting newspapers over it, but often revealing unsightly holes." In the basement "in a lower room, not more than fifteen feet square, *twenty-six* human beings reside. A man could scarcely stand erect in it . . . women lay on a mass of filthy, unsightly rags in the corner—sick, feeble, and emaciated; six or seven children were in various attitudes in the corner . . . two women were peeling potatoes, and actually pulling off the skins with their finger nails; the smoke [from their fire] and stench of the room was so suffocating that it could not be long endured, and the announcement that, in addition to the misfortune of poverty, they had the measles to boot, started most of our party in a precipitate retreat from the premises." Others confirmed that dirt pervaded the building. In trying to describe the filth of one Old Brewery room used as a lodging house, upstate New Yorker Joel Ross wrote that "if you have ever seen farmers fix lodgings for their hogs, you will probably need no further explanation, except that the pigs have more *straw*, and less *bugs*." Nathaniel P. Willis, the writer and critic, who toured the Old Brewery with a police escort in the early 1840s, described the following scene in one apartment:

The floor was covered by human beings asleep in their rags; and when called by the officer to look in at a low closet [i.e., bedroom] beyond, we could hardly put our feet to the ground, they lay so closely together, black and white, men, women, and children. The doorless apartment beyond, of the size of a kennel, was occupied by a woman and her daughter, and the daughter's child, lying together on the floor, and covered by rags and cloths of no distinguishable color, the rubbish of bones and dirt only displaced by their emaciated limbs. The sight was too sickening to endure, but there was no egress without following close to the lantern. [In another apartment] six or seven black women lay together in a heap. . . . I had never before any adequate idea of poverty in cities. I did not dream that human beings, within reach of human aid, could be abandoned to the wretchedness which I there saw.<sup>4</sup>

Whether this crowding was typical is difficult to determine. The only thorough census of the building, taken in 1850, lists 221 people living in thirty-five apartments, an average of 6.3 persons per apartment. The

census enumerator, who conducted his survey in late spring, did not find twenty-six persons inhabiting any room or apartment, but he did note sixteen in one, fourteen in a second, and thirteen in a third, numbers rarely found in other buildings in the neighborhood. It is not inconceivable that twenty-six could have squeezed into a basement lodging room at some point, especially in the winter, when the homeless were most likely to splurge on indoor accommodations.<sup>5</sup>

As with most legends, some staples of the Old Brewery story are obvious fabrications. In an era when fewer than thirty murders per year were committed in the entire city, Asbury's daily murder toll was ridiculous. Charges of rampant incest also are unfounded. Furthermore, at least some of the building's residents were not the depraved souls denigrated in the press. On his visit to the notorious tenement, Joel Ross met John Burke, who called himself the "Old Man of the Brewery and Father of Temperance." Burke, a fifty-four-year-old chair maker who had lived in the Old Brewery for thirteen years, took Ross upstairs from his shop to his apart-



This print of the Old Brewery dates from about 1850, when the Five Points Mission bought the building. The numbers in the first-story doorways identify certain particularly notorious parts of the building, such as "Murderer's Alley" (number 1) and the "Den of Thieves" (3, 4, and 5). Collection of the New-York Historical Society.

ment. Much to Ross's surprise, he found that "the floors were carpeted, the beds were tidy, the furniture clean, and on every face, a smile."

The Scandinavian writer Fredrika Bremer also found that the Old Brewery did not quite live up to its reputation. Although she and her female companion found much evidence of debauchery, "neither did we meet any instance of rudeness nor even of incivility. We saw young lads sitting at gaming-tables with old ruffians; unfortunate women suffering from horrible diseases, sickly children, giddy young girls, ill-tempered women quarrelling with the whole world, and some families, also we saw, who seemed to me, wretched rather through poverty than moral degradation. . . . Every grade of moral corruption, may be found festering and fermenting in this Old Brewery; filth, rags, pestilent air, everything is in that Old Brewery, and yet after all, I did not see anything there worse than I had seen before in Paris, London, and Stockholm."<sup>6</sup>

Bremer was right. Conditions in the Old Brewery were not uniformly squalid, nor were the tenants habitually murderous and dissolute. Yet dozens, perhaps even hundreds, of its residents lived in windowless, filthy, teeming apartments that were unfit for habitation. Everyone, from lawmakers to ordinary citizens, was aware of the conditions. But no government agency made the slightest effort to do anything about them. In an era of laissez-faire, decades before the country's first housing codes had been written, city officials could not control where or how people lived. Before mass immigration, when abject poverty was rare in America and its cities were relatively free from congestion, housing codes were not necessary. But the desperate newcomers who poured into New York in the famine years were willing to live in conditions unimaginable to previous generations of Americans. A charitable group, the Five Points Mission, eventually bought the Old Brewery, and in December 1852 had it torn down. But tenements with conditions nearly as bad would persist in Five Points for another half century.

## CHAPTER THREE

## How They Lived



FROM HENRY ROTH to George Bellows, American writers and artists have made the tenement a central symbol of immigrant life in America. Today, even many city dwellers who walk by tenements every day would be hard-pressed to identify them by the name. Yet not long ago, the word fairly pulsed with meaning, conjuring visions of teeming, reeking, sweltering brick boxes bursting with hyphenated Americans.

Accounts of Five Points had not always focused on its tenements. In the 1830s, the press had concentrated on the supposed moral degradation of the neighborhood—the prostitution, the crime, the drunkenness. But the neighborhood's already inferior housing deteriorated significantly during the 1830s and '40s, due to lack of maintenance and overcrowding. By the 1850s, exposés of Five Points life increasingly concentrated on the tenements. These buildings—"worn out, . . . disgustingly filthy, and unhealthy beyond description"—became just as infamous as the Five Pointers themselves.<sup>7</sup>

"THESE TUMBLING AND SQUALID ROOKERIES"

There were two types of tenements found in Five Points—those of wood and those of brick—and they were in many ways dramatically different. Wooden tenements were generally two or two and a half stories tall. Most had been designed to hold an artisan's or shopkeeper's place of business, his family, and perhaps a few of his employees. These buildings, dozens of which still stood in the 1850s, generally measured about twenty to twenty-

five feet wide and twenty-five to thirty feet deep. Other wooden structures had been built as workshops, stables, or for mixed commercial/residential use, and might be three stories tall and up to forty feet deep. Sometimes two or three of these were crowded into a single 25-by-100-foot standard lot. By the 1850s, landlords had carved most of them into tenements, creating in each building two to five apartments plus commercial space for a shop or saloon in the front of the house on the ground floor.<sup>8</sup>

Before the Civil War, these wooden tenements—"so old and rotten that they seem ready to tumble together into a vast rubbish-heap"—were considered Five Points' worst, "the oldest, most rickety, wooden buildings" in the city. Many apartments in these structures consisted of a single room, which often had to provide shelter for an entire family. A Health Department investigation noted that in some dwellings, especially those in attics and basements, "*the ceilings . . . were too low to allow the inmates to stand erect.*" The bedrooms were typically windowless, and the resulting lack of ventilation and air circulation created an "atmosphere productive of the most offensive and malignant diseases."<sup>9</sup>

The wooden tenements also typically failed to keep out the elements. They were so drafty that tenants commonly posted handbills on the walls, not for decoration but as insulation. "Open to the wind and the storm—and far less comfortable than the buildings used as *barns* or cattle-stalls," Five Points' "wretched dens" of wood were "exposed to all the rigors of inclement weather, and to every possible cause of wretchedness and suffering," complained the *Courier and Enquirer*. "We have known cases in which nearly a *dozen* persons were forced to live in one small room, less than ten feet square, immediately under an old, dilapidated roof, which let in a full tith of the rain that fell upon it, and entirely destitute of any means of keeping warm." Visitors commonly found snow drifting in the entranceways, halls, and sometimes even the apartments themselves. Even if the snow could be kept outside, it might make its way inside in another form, for "most of the roofs were leaky, and the basements, after every rain were flooded with filthy water."<sup>10</sup>

Water was not the only thing that spilled into these tenements when it rained. Because their original owners had designed these small frame buildings for far fewer people, the hordes now occupying them severely overtaxed the backyard outhouses. A Health Department report noted that the commodes of these wooden tenements "were in a most filthy and disgust-

ing condition; in several places there were accumulations of stagnant fluid, full of all sorts of putrefying matter, the effluvia from which was intolerable." Few of the wooden tenements were connected to sewers in the antebellum years, so heavy rains tended to wash outhouse "effluvia" into Five Points basements.<sup>11</sup>

By 1855, brick tenements outnumbered those of wood in Five Points by a ratio of about three to two. Much taller and deeper than frame structures, the brick buildings housed in that year 76 percent of the neighborhood's residents. Many brick tenements were just as offensive. In the four-story brick building at 17 Baxter,\* for example, legislative investigators found "walls damp, rooms dark, passages filthy, and with no sort of ventilation." These brick tenements were built in one of two patterns. The most common design in the antebellum years called for a structure twenty-five feet wide by fifty feet deep. Such buildings generally reached three, four, or (especially after 1845) five stories in height. Each floor above the ground floor usually contained four two-room apartments; the front half of the ground floor generally housed a store or saloon. Apartment dimensions tended to be identical. The main room of each two-room apartment, which served as kitchen, living room, and dining room, usually measured about twelve feet square and typically had two windows, facing either the street or the yard. The second room, known as the "sleeping closet," was aptly named, for it was windowless and hardly bigger than a modern walk-in closet, usually about eight by ten feet. Thus the entire apartment covered just 225 square feet.<sup>12</sup>

In a triumph of efficiency over humanity, landlords often built a second brick tenement in the backyard behind the front building. These rear tenements generally measured twenty-five by twenty-five feet (precisely half the size of the front buildings) and were divided into two two-room apartments per floor. Anticipating that other rear tenements would be built adjacent to their own, landlords put no windows on the backs or sides of these structures. The only windows overlooked the outhouses in

\* For reasons that will be discussed at the end of this chapter, city lawmakers in 1854 decided to change the names of Five Points' four most notorious streets. Orange became Baxter, Anthony became Worth, Cross became Park, and Little Water became Mission Place. Because most of the tenement descriptions in this chapter date from just after 1854, I will for the sake of consistency use the new street names throughout this chapter.

the yard, "thick with mephitic gases, and nauseous from the effluvia of decaying matter and pools of stagnant water." As a result, rear tenements were "suffused with the odor emanating from the cesspools." Rarely did enough fresh air reach them to allow these noxious odors to escape. "These tumbling and squalid rookeries," concluded an investigative committee, are "... the most repulsive features of the tenant-house system."<sup>13</sup>

Some landlords, not satisfied with two tenements, sought to cram even more dwelling space into their lots. "The crazy pigeon-holes of the Five Points," as *Harper's Weekly* described them, were legendary throughout the city. "Every inch ... is covered by structures of various kinds and degrees of discomfort, into which is crowded the reeking, seething mass of poverty, vice, sickness, and wretchedness." Some property owners managed to fit a third tenement onto their lots. Others converted cellars, attics, and even storage areas into apartments. Still others erected tiny shacks in yards in order to squeeze a few extra dollars in rent from their property.<sup>14</sup>

Whether brick or frame, front or rear, most Five Points tenements were terribly overcrowded. Press reports described seven, ten, or even fifteen people living in a single room. But how typical were such horror stories? According to the census, the typical two-room dwelling held on average "only" five people per apartment. Yet 46 percent of these apartments housed six or more people, and one in six accommodated eight or more. With so many people per apartment, and so many buildings per lot, the population density of the Sixth Ward in the 1850s (310.4 per acre) exceeded that of any other district in the city. With the possible exception of one or two sections of London, antebellum Five Points was the most densely populated neighborhood in the world.<sup>15</sup>

Five Pointers adjusted to this crowding in a number of ways. Squeezing in enough beds for all the inhabitants always presented a challenge. Sometimes a bed doubled as a couch or was covered with a board for use as a table or countertop during the day. In many dwellings, the "beds" were merely piles of rags or straw covered with "bed clothes" (sheets), which could easily be pushed out of the way when the room was too crowded. Children especially slept on such bedding. In the apartment of one Italian family, one child slept "under the bed, another under the table, a third by the stove, and the fourth at liberty to roll over any of her sisters." Children lucky enough to have beds usually shared them with their siblings. One remembered sleeping head to toe with his four brothers and sisters so they

could all fit in the single bed allotted to them. Sometimes squeezing an extra bed into the apartment to reduce such overcrowded sleeping arrangements meant partially blocking a door, which might prove deadly should fire break out. Beds that folded into the wall or stacked on top of each other would have significantly reduced such crowding, but such luxuries were beyond the means of most Five Pointers.<sup>16</sup>

Privacy in such conditions was virtually impossible. Families strategically hung curtains, prints, and handbills to create private spaces within the tiny apartments, especially around the parents' bed. But since these added to the clutter and often made the small spaces seem even tinier, not everyone bothered. Given that many of the immigrants, especially the Irish and the Italians, had lived in one-room huts in Europe, these conditions were at least familiar to them. But as they adapted to nineteenth-century American ideals of decorum and separation of the sexes, this lack of privacy must have been mortifying, especially for women.<sup>17</sup>

A crowded apartment was not necessarily a cluttered one. Visitors to Five Points usually found the dwellings rather bare by middle-class New York standards. One investigator asserted that each abode featured "the same bare floors, the same blank walls, the same pine tables, broken chairs and ragged bedding." For the most destitute, this certainly would have been the case. They often had to pawn their possessions to buy food and fuel. Impoverished widows with many children to support and families whose main breadwinner could not work for long periods due to illness were most likely to live in this state. Others kept possessions to a minimum because they moved so frequently, changing apartments once a year or even more often as their employment fortunes rose and fell.

But more often than not, Five Pointers did what they could to give their rooms a comfortable, homelike quality. An 1859 survey of tenement apartments in the *New York Times* found that most contained "lithographs, in high colors, of the crucifixion, Christ in the manger, Mary at the Annunciation, the Parting Lovers, and JAMES BUCHANAN." Many had "broad posters" bearing slogans such as "'True Democrats meet here'; or, 'Friends of good oysters call in,' pasted over the bed," a reference to the free food offered at political rallies. The same reporter noted mantels filled with bric-à-brac in many apartments. An archaeological dig in Five Points in the 1990s uncovered toys of every description, commemorative cups and saucers, cologne and hair tonic, all indicating that the majority of the

neighborhood's residents could afford more than the barest necessities. Five Pointers did not usually live in the utter destitution that most often attracted the attention of the press.<sup>18</sup>

"THE MOST REPULSIVE HOLES THAT EVER A  
HUMAN BEING WAS FORCED TO SLEEP IN"

Five Points' unusually high population density resulted not merely from landlords' greed but also from the custom of some tenement dwellers to sublet space in their apartments to non-family members. Twenty-eight percent of Five Points families took in boarders. Of those who did, two-thirds rented space to only one or two non-family members. But in the most decrepit parts of the neighborhood, such as Baxter and Mulberry Streets between Park and Bayard, boarders abounded. Three-quarters of the sixteen apartments at 31 Baxter Street, for example, had lodgers in 1855. Boarders lived in ten of the fourteen apartments in the rear building at 51 Mulberry in that same year. Those who rented space to outsiders generally offered two types of arrangements. A "boarder" paid for both food and a place to sleep, while a "lodger" paid for sleeping space only. Lodging and boarding allowed recent immigrants to save money while seeking work to pay for the emigration of other family members. But many who had no such obligations chose to board anyway. Young immigrants often lived in boardinghouses until they got married. For older bachelors, living in someone else's home was a convenient means to obtain both shelter and meals. Widows often could afford no other kind of living arrangement. All told, one in seven Five Pointers lived in a non-family member's apartment.<sup>19</sup>

Widows were most likely to take in lodgers; nearly two in five widows did so. Barbara Sullivan, a forty-six-year-old widow from the Tuosist portion of the Landsdowne estate in Kerry, lived in the rear tenement at 39 Baxter in the mid-1850s with her six children, who ranged in age from four to sixteen when they arrived in New York in 1851. In 1855, Sullivan, her children, and her son-in-law shared her apartment with six lodgers: a forty-year-old widowed ragpicker, her fifteen-year-old newsboy son, a forty-year-old widowed peddler, and the peddler's three children. Johanna McCarty, a forty-five-year-old widow with five children, took in eight lodgers in her three-room apartment at 31 Baxter in 1855.<sup>20</sup>

Many non-widows took in boarders as well. In the rear building at 51 Mulberry Street, Patrick Hogan and his wife Mary took in one boarder; the Fox family rented space to two lodgers; the Shields, McCormacks, Mullins, and McManuses had three lodgers each; the Kavans and Conways four lodgers each; the Hanlans eight lodgers and a boarder; and widow Mary Sullivan one lodger. Yet 51 Mulberry and 31 Baxter held many more boarders than average. The front and rear buildings at 65 Mott were more typical. Seven of the sixteen apartments did not house any lodgers in 1850. Of the nine that did, five had just a single boarder.<sup>21</sup>

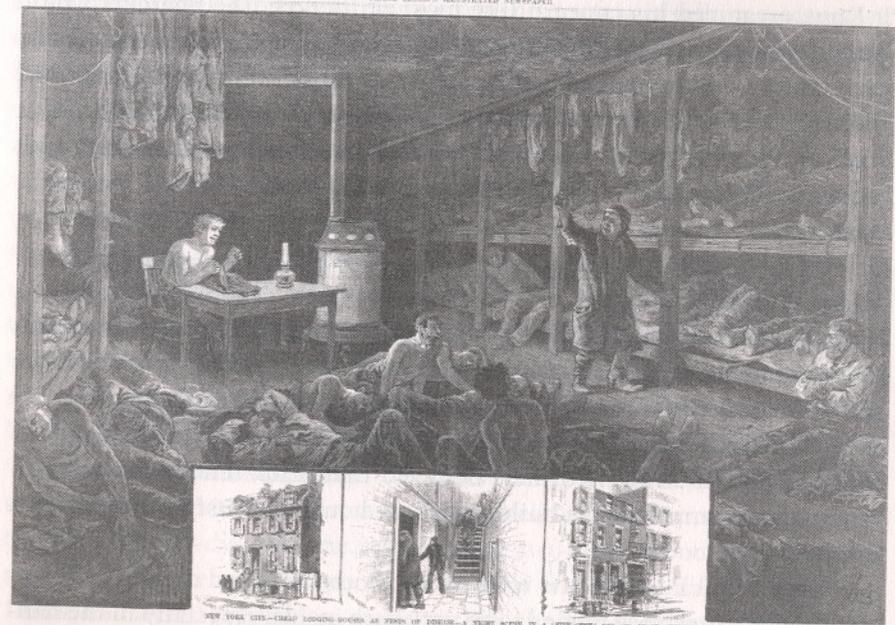
Although most Five Points lodgers lived in private homes, some patronized commercial boardinghouses. In New York City, these ran the gamut from elegant establishments catering to professionals, to modest mechanics' boardinghouses that were crowded but clean and respectable, to basement flophouses overflowing with people and filth. Five Points, of course, contained none of the refined residences, only a sprinkling of the mechanics' abodes, and dozens of the worst class.

Most of the seediest boardinghouses were located in cellars, where rent was cheapest and there were few other uses for the space. Cellar dwelling peaked in the early 1850s, as desperately poor immigrants flooding into the city sought to save every possible penny in order to finance the emigration of spouses, children, parents, and siblings. A *New York Tribune* exposé at midcentury found that the Sixth Ward contained 285 basements with 1,156 occupants, meaning that approximately 1 in 17 residents lived in a basement. At least half that number probably lived in Five Points, many in cellar-level lodging houses.<sup>22</sup>

The overcrowding in Five Points boardinghouses was terrible. Even before the heaviest immigration had begun, a friend of minister Samuel Prime saw lodging houses in Five Points where the rooms were "as thickly covered with bodies as a field of battle could be with the slain." In many of these establishments, lodgers slept on two-tiered bunks, which often consisted of canvas stretched between two wooden rails. When business was brisk, proprietors created a third tier by placing other customers on the floor underneath the lowest bunk. Others slept on bed frames covered with straw. Cellar lodging rooms were both crowded and, with so many dirty lodgers squeezing into windowless bedrooms, filthy and smelly as well. "Without air, without light, filled with damp vapor from the mildewed walls, and with vermin in ratio to the dirtiness of the inhabitants," com-

mented the *Tribune*, "they are the most repulsive holes that ever a human being was forced to sleep in. There is not a farmer's hog-pen in the country, that is not immeasurably ahead of them in point of health—often in point of cleanliness." Doctors who worked in the tenement districts could immediately spot the cellar dwellers among their patients. "If the whitened and cadaverous countenance should be an insufficient guide," explained one, "the odor of the person will remove all doubt; a musty smell, which a damp cellar only can impart, pervades every article of dress, the woollens more particularly, as well as the hair and skin." In a neighborhood filled with hardship and privation, the suffering of these cellar dwellers was perhaps the worst of all.<sup>23</sup>

Other dives in Five Points were mere flophouses for drunks and street people, charging as little as three cents for a bed or even one cent per night for a place on the floor. Beds pushed against the walls of saloons and dance halls also catered to the lowest of the low, men and women who paid two



Basement boardinghouse at 508 Pearl Street, from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (March 18, 1882): 56–57. Collection of the Library of Congress.

or three cents to sleep in full view of the other customers. A basement lodging house at 35 Baxter, "one of the filthiest, blackest holes" the *Times* reporter had ever seen, nonetheless charged six cents per night or "three shillings" (37½ cents) per week excluding food, a sure sign that it was at least a step or two above those catering to the most down-and-out.

There were cleaner, less crowded boardinghouses in Five Points too, but they received far less attention in the press. Many were large operations, occupying whole buildings and employing cooks and servants. In Five Points, these establishments especially catered to Christian Germans and tended to locate on Mott and Elizabeth Streets. One such boardinghouse was at 66 Mott, run by thirty-six-year-old Ignatz Kunz. Seventeen young German-speaking artisans boarded there in 1855, including carpenters, blacksmiths, gas fitters, and a goldbeater. Few had lived in the city long and none was married. They undoubtedly enjoyed flirting with the establishment's two young German "servant girls," Christiana and Presence, who had immigrated to New York in 1854. Kunz, who had himself emigrated from Germany in 1845, also ran a porterhouse on the premises. If Kunz organized his concern like most of its type, the boarders would have slept two to a bed, and four or six to a room. At breakfast and dinner, they could look forward to hearty meals. A British immigrant described the typical breakfast as consisting of "coffee, bread and butter, beefsteaks, pork or mutton chops, sausages, pickles, and buckwheat cakes with molasses. This is the boarding house mode of stuffing."<sup>24</sup>

#### "THE MOST SICKENING AND PESTILENTIAL STENCHES"

In the dozen or so years after 1845, when immigrants poured into Five Points, landlords quickened the pace of new construction, replacing more and more of the two- to three-story wooden tenements with four- to five-story brick buildings. Five Pointers might have been expected to applaud the change. But while reformers believed that brick tenements were an improvement, many of the buildings turned out to be just as miserable to live in.

Because brick tenements were so big (both taller and deeper than previous tenements), they tended to be very dark inside, especially in the hallways above the first floor. Either to save money or out of fear of starting a fire, landlords almost never provided gas lighting. Little light made its way

up from the front door because in order to maximize living space, architects designed these buildings with extremely steep staircases. "No cave or dungeon was ever darker," complained one charitable worker about the stairway in a lower Mulberry Street tenement in 1867. A newspaper reporter encountered similar conditions climbing the stairs of a Baxter Street tenement in the 1890s, noting that "it was necessary to grope our way to the top by lighting matches on every landing." An antebellum investigative committee found these same conditions in both brick and wooden tenements, stating that "not only were the stairways crooked and inordinately steep, but they were so dark that faces could not be distinguished." Treacherously dark hallways were a consistent complaint of Five Points reformers and residents alike.<sup>25</sup>

The dark, steep stairways became more of an issue as tenements grew taller, for by the 1850s few landlords built front tenements of less than five stories. The thought of carrying young children, groceries, or pails of water up three, four, or even five flights of these steep, dark stairs filled many a housewife with dread. Some older women, especially those with bad backs or arthritic knees, rarely left their apartments for fear of falling, and stories of neighbors injuring themselves in stairway spills were a staple of tenement gossip.<sup>26</sup>

Curiously, the tallest tenement in nineteenth-century Five Points was apparently the very first New York building built specifically to serve as a tenement. This seven-story building, which still stands at 65 Mott Street, is a living monument to the evils of the tenement system. Historians have generally cited a building erected on the Lower East Side in 1833 by iron manufacturer James P. Allaire as the city's first designed tenement, basing this assertion on the late-nineteenth-century reminiscences of New Yorker Charles Haswell. But the building at 65 Mott almost certainly predates Allaire's structure by nearly a decade. According to an 1879 article in the building trades journal *Plumber and Sanitary Engineer*, 65 Mott Street "has been occupied some fifty-five years." This would date the building's construction to 1824. Its seven stories—a height then unprecedented for a dwelling place—dwarfed the surrounding two-story wooden homes and must have made quite a spectacle when it was first built. Even in the 1880s, half a century after its construction, the *Times* complained that the tenement "stands out like a wart growing on the top of a festering sore. It is the crowning glory of tenement-houses." Behind it stood a five-story rear

tenement, meaning that at least thirty-four and probably thirty-six two-room apartments had been crowded onto this 2,450-square-foot property. Even by the end of the nineteenth century, no other landlord in Five Points had the nerve to squeeze so many families into so small a space. And like the other tall tenements in Five Points, their hallways were steeped in pitch black darkness even on the sunniest days.<sup>27</sup>

Just as infamous as Five Points' dark passageways were the layers of dirt that begrimed so many of its tenements. Describing a building on Little Water Street, a state investigative committee found that "the floors were covered with dirt, which had lain so long that, with occasional slops of water and continued treading on, it had the appearance of the greasy refuse of a woolen mill. There were sluggish, yellow drops pending from the low ceilings, and a dank, green slime upon the walls." The city inspector stated that the typical Five Points tenement contained walls "with the plaster broken off in many places, exposing the lath and beams, and leaving openings for the escape from within of the effluvia of vermin, dead and alive." Where the walls remained intact, they were "smeared with the blood of unmentionable insects, and dirt of all indescribable colours."<sup>28</sup>

Five Points tenements became so dirty in part because their residents invariably tracked in filth from the neighborhood's foul streets. New York streets were reputed to be the dirtiest in antebellum America. For decades citizens had thrown their garbage into the gutters, hoping that scavenging pigs would eat the mess or that rain would wash it away. Homeowners were supposed to sweep garbage into piles for the city to cart away, but the carts never came. As a result, street traffic mashed this household refuse together with the droppings of horses and other animals to create an inches-thick sheet of putrefying muck, which when it rained or snowed became particularly vile. Only when city fathers feared an outbreak of cholera in 1832 did the city properly clean its streets for the first time. When workers chopped and scraped the sludge off, revealing the paved streets below, an old woman who had lived in New York all her life purportedly asked: "'Where in the world did all those [paving] stones come from? . . . I never knew that the streets were covered with stones before.'"<sup>29</sup>

Although the city subsequently created a street-cleaning department, it did little to improve Five Points' thoroughfares. Because the district was so crowded, the garbage overwhelmed the new system. "The Sixth Ward

can claim the preeminence of being the dirtiest Ward of the dirtiest City in the world," claimed one writer in 1848, citing Baxter and Worth Streets as the worst in the district. When the *Tribune* compiled a list of New York's filthiest thoroughfares two years later, it included virtually every block in the Five Points neighborhood. Not surprisingly, Baxter and Mulberry Streets, the most densely populated in the district, were the worst. "The latter street, from Canal to Chatham st., is a continual depository of garbage," noted the *Tribune* on a Tuesday in 1865, "and although it was cleaned on Friday, hundreds of loads have accumulated since that time, and the stench arising therefore is intolerable." According to another investigative report, "in the winter the filth and garbage, etc., accumulate in the streets, to the depth sometimes of two or three feet. The garbage boxes are a perpetual source of nuisance in the streets, filth and offal being thrown all around them, pools of filthy water in many instances remaining in the gutters." From this "decaying vegetable matter, and filth of every conceivable kind" emanated "the most sickening and pestilential stenches." These last two reports detailed conditions at the end of the Civil War when Five Points thoroughfares were much cleaner than they had been in the 1830s and '40s. One can hardly imagine how the streets had looked and smelled in those antebellum decades.<sup>30</sup>

With so much dirt and grime encrusting their neighborhood streets, Five Points tenement dwellers inevitably dragged much of that mess into their homes on shoes and clothes. Because Five Pointers did not usually own much clothing, they often had to wear their dirty clothes for quite some time. Clothing could not be washed on a whim since it might take days to dry. "Hard wash-days"—typically Mondays—provided some of the most unpleasant memories for tenement housewives such as those in Five Points. Mothers bribed children with candy money on wash day to keep them out of the house so they could devote their full attention and the entire space of the apartment to the arduous task at hand. They first made numerous trips up and down the stairs to haul water up from the yard. Then they heated the water on the stove and set to work scrubbing.

Drying the wash was actually the most dreaded task. There were many options, all involving some risk. The advantage of living on a low floor (with fewer flights of stairs to climb) became a disadvantage on wash day, because when hanging your laundry out to dry, "someone else might put out a red wash or a blue wash above it, and it drips down and makes you do



Though this was meant to be a humorous image, Five Points streets were often this dirty, especially in the pre-Civil War years. Street sweeping was hard work, but the jobs were much sought after, and were usually given as rewards to those who toiled faithfully for neighborhood political leaders. The “S.C.D.” on this Irishman’s hat stands for Street Cleaning Department. *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* (August 2, 1879): 372. Collection of the Library of Congress.

your wash all over again.” Similarly, “the women up over you shake their bedclothes and rugs over your clothes,” complained one lower-level tenement dweller of the dust and dirt that would drop onto her briefly clean clothing.<sup>31</sup>

The perils of line drying applied to just half the tenement dwellers, because only those in apartments facing the yard had access to the clotheslines. “Those who live in the back have lines,” testified an envious tenement resident before an investigative committee, “a luxury which can only be truly appreciated by those who must carry every bit of their wash up three or four flights of stairs to the roof, and on particularly cold winter days, it is almost enough to make people determine to wear their clothing longer.” Roof drying avoided some of the problems of line drying, but it carried its own risks. If you hung your clothes on the roof, complained one tenement housewife, “you must watch them or they disappear. Only people who live in the back have pulleys, and even then one sheet and tablecloth fill the line.” For some, roof drying was not an option. One

housewife could not bring her clothes to the roof because climbing the stairs “makes my heart beat so.” Children could be detailed to stand guard over the family’s drying clothing, but they often abandoned their posts due to cold and boredom.<sup>32</sup>

Even if a housewife miraculously managed to cleanse the family wardrobe, the bodies underneath that clothing were bathed so rarely that they must have smelled awful anyway. No one in antebellum America bathed frequently. But tenement dwellers such as those in Five Points did so least of all, not out of any cultural aversion to cleanliness but because they had no access to bathing facilities. Tubs were not a standard tenement feature. They were expensive, and even if one could afford a tub, where would it fit? Those who did own tubs generally stored coal in them, limiting bathing to those days when the coal supply was nearly exhausted. Finally, drawing a bath was a laborious task, as water had to be hauled up from the yard, a bucket at a time, and then heated (again in small quantities) on the stove. This made bathing expensive as well, because coal was dear to a tenement family.

No matter how clean their clothes, bodies, or apartments might have been, the horrid stench emanating from their backyards—and especially from the outhouses located there—would have made apartment life in Five Points an olfactory nightmare. There were essentially three types of toilet facilities in antebellum tenement yards. The most modern and sophisticated connected the outdoor toilets directly to sewer lines, flushing sewage directly and immediately away from the tenement yard. But very few Five Points tenements could boast such toilets by the Civil War, in part because few streets in the neighborhood were connected to the sewers. In 1857, only one-quarter of the city had sewer lines, and few of these were located in Five Points. Even in 1865, the only streets in Five Points with sewer lines were Centre, Pearl, and Worth, as well as Mott and Mulberry above Bayard. But just because a street had a sewer did not mean that landlords necessarily connected their buildings to it. Legislation enacted in 1867 required *new* buildings to tap into sewer lines, but did not require the same of existing structures. Few of the old wooden tenements on Worth, Baxter, and Park Streets would have been connected in the Civil War period.

Instead, most buildings had either cesspools or “school sinks.” A cesspool in theory had to be emptied periodically. Judging by the complaints of tenants, such cleanings were rare. A school sink, in contrast, was

a kind of cesspool connected to the sewers. Sewage collected below the commodes in a trough, which someone had to empty periodically by opening a sluice gate to the sewer lines. Property agents did not perform this task—which was nearly as unpleasant as emptying a cesspool—as frequently as necessary. In addition, the connection between the trough and the sewer line often became clogged. Raw sewage thus often sat festering in the backyards of the tenements for weeks or months at a time.<sup>33</sup>

The wooden outhouses above these pits were incredibly dirty, in part because their roofs and walls admitted too many of nature's elements, and in part because they were overused and undercleaned. The wooden seats were often rotting away. "To look at the abominable water-closets that exist almost every where" in Five Points, lamented one of the few publications willing to broach this delicate subject, "and then imagine that women and children are compelled to resort to them, is almost too much for human endurance." Tenants usually blamed one another for the mess, and were thus unwilling to clean the stalls. As a result, many resorted to chamber pots, which could be emptied into the outhouse when convenient, or out the window into the yard when it was dark.<sup>34</sup>

The yards in which these outhouses sat were thus revolting masses of mud, excrement, and garbage. Trash littered the yards both because it was stored there until put on the street, and also because tenants tossed it from their windows. They did so sometimes out of laziness, sometimes because it was too cold or rainy to go outside, and sometimes to avoid "climbing the dark stairs and running the risk of breaking one's legs," admitted one early-twentieth-century tenement dweller. "In some cases it is almost a necessity to throw it out, the premium on space is so high in their tiny kitchens . . . and just enough room to turn about." The combination of decaying and rotting animal and vegetable matter littering the yards attracted all sorts of vermin. In an attempt to cover up this filth, landlords often laid wooden boards over the ground in the yards, but the stench and effluvia still percolated up from beneath them. In one yard, for example, the boards when pressed yielded "even in dry weather, a thick greenish fluid." Not surprisingly, the Sixth Ward's sanitary inspector found that only 24 of the ward's 609 tenements were in "good sanitary condition" in 1865.<sup>35</sup>

Even if sewage made its way out of the tenement yard and into the sewer system, its odor continued to foul the neighborhood. Sewage was

supposed to run through culverts under the street, but they were open to the air through grates at intersections. In addition, the Sixth Ward's culverts were "often choked up on account of the large amount of filth and garbage thrown into the gutters, and which is carried down the sewers." A mixture of sewage, trash, and "filthy water" might "stand several days before an outlet is cleared for it . . . in this pestilential locality." Even when the culverts were not blocked, the sewage did not flow very well, especially in low-lying areas such as Five Points. Early New York sewers were really "one elongated cesspool," insisted an 1859 report, "throwing out its noxious gases . . . at every opening on the corners of the streets, to fill and surround the dwellings and be inhaled with every breath." Every antebellum New York neighborhood was dirty by modern standards, but Five Points was the dirtiest. Newcomers never failed to comment upon the revolting smells of the neighborhood and the stench of its worst tenements.<sup>36</sup>

#### "THE LITTLE ONES CRIED AND CRIED FROM COLD"

The constant noise of tenement life probably bothered neighborhood residents just as much as the smells. The thin interior walls in both wooden and brick buildings blocked few sounds. The combination of wood floors and little carpeting meant that virtually no movement from above could escape the attention of those below. Children shouting, spouses fighting, and babies wailing all contributed to the cacophony, often making sleep impossible. A newspaper editor listed noise complaints as one of the most frequent causes of fights between tenement families. Street noise plagued those in the front apartments, while in the rear the sound from neighbors in buildings facing them (usually only twenty-five feet or less away) also caused distress. Windows that would not close properly as well as loose or missing panes exacerbated the problem, as did the universal practice of leaving apartment doors open for ventilation.<sup>37</sup>

Extremes of heat and cold—not outside but within the tenements—also afflicted Five Pointers. Immigrants from the temperate British Isles, especially those from Ireland, had never experienced freezing winters or sweltering, humid summers in their native lands. In the older buildings, cold posed the most serious problem. The exterior walls of wooden tenements were not insulated, and cold winds whistled relentlessly through

their cracks, as well as through broken or improperly hung windows. Residents frequently lacked the fuel to heat these homes adequately. In Ireland, even the poorest peasant could usually find free turf to warm his cabin and cook his food. In New York, the Irish had to buy fuel (usually coal by the 1840s) to heat their stoves, and coal was expensive. As a result, tenement children were usually expected to scavenge for coal. The Irish-American journalist Owen Kildare remembered that as a destitute child in the Fourth Ward (just east of Five Points), his stepparents ordered him to find or steal ten pieces of coal each day. When scavenging failed to produce an adequate supply, desperately poor Five Pointers resorted to burning their doors, furniture, and bedding, especially on bitterly cold days and nights.<sup>38</sup>

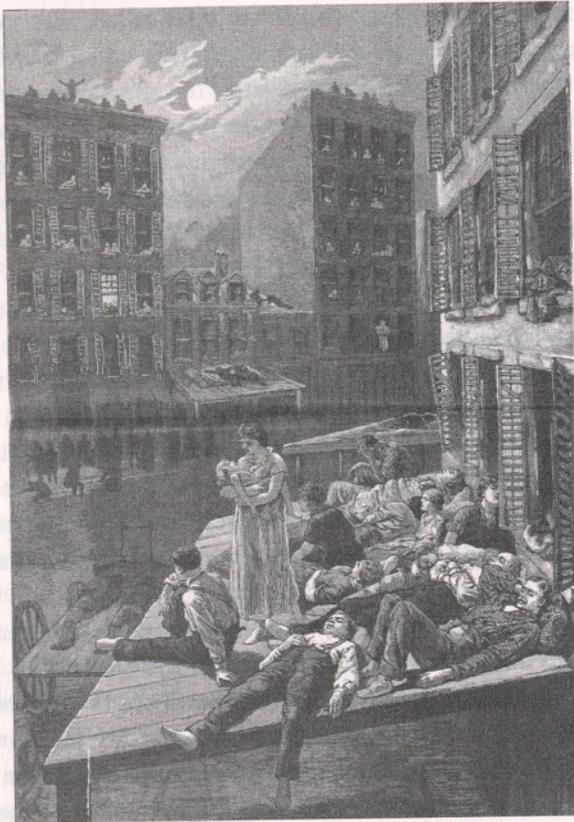
Yet few froze to death. Neighbors usually intervened before suffering could turn fatal. "The kindness of these poor people to each other," commented the journal of a Five Points charitable group, "is frequently astonishing, but must be witnessed to be appreciated." Neighbors might bring cases of hardship to the attention of the Five Points Mission or the Five Points House of Industry after their establishment in the early 1850s. A House of Industry publication described an incident in which its missionaries found on Worth Street "a woman and five children in a room without a fire, and for the last two days they had had no food save a morsel given them by a neighbor almost as poor as themselves. . . . What little furniture they possessed had been burned for fuel, and when this last resource was gone, the little ones cried and cried from cold." Someone did freeze to death on Baxter Street in the winter of 1860-61, but such cases were rare. As a result, the *Tribune* could boast in 1864 that the woman who had "perished with cold and was eaten of rats on Mulberry-street is forgotten long ago." Nonetheless, the cold kept many a Five Pointer awake at night, made others sick, and was a source of constant worry for those of limited means.<sup>39</sup>

As tall brick tenements replaced small wooden hovels, heat became the greater issue. In order to support themselves, five- and six-story tenements were generally constructed with one-foot-thick exterior brick walls which kept out the cold fairly well, though these buildings were still not comfortably warm. But a brick tenement "in a hot spell becomes something little more tolerable than a sweat-box," noted *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. Poor ventilation and air circulation contributed to the

oppressive temperatures. Open windows brought no relief to the stifling apartments, as cooler outdoor air stubbornly refused to flow inside. Those living on the upper floors suffered most in the summer, as the heat wafted persistently upward. During the day and evening, tenement dwellers poured into the streets to escape the indoor infernos, but at night there was little relief. Referring to the tiny windowless bedrooms that predominated in these buildings, a reporter from *Frank Leslie's* asserted that "the very idea of refreshing slumber in one of the seething little ovens which must usually shelter not one, but several persons, and sometimes a whole family, appears ridiculous." Many moved their beds near the living-room windows, but for half the tenement residents this meant confronting the stench emanating from the outhouses. Those lucky enough to have fire escapes slept on them during heat waves. Others sought relief on roofs, stoops, and even sidewalks, "until it is almost impossible to pass along without stepping upon a human body." Occasionally, newspapers would report an injury or even a death as a sleeping tenement dweller fell from a window ledge or fire escape.<sup>40</sup>

The fire escapes where so many Five Pointers spent sweltering summer nights were only erected at about the time of the Civil War. In 1860, the New York legislature enacted the first New York law mandating their installation, though the legislation stipulated only that landlords put them on new buildings housing eight or more families. A horrible Sixth Ward fire during the 1860 legislative session had helped convince the lawmakers to enact this limited statute. It broke out on the night of Thursday, February 2, just a block west of the Five Points neighborhood at 142 Elm Street. The blaze started in the basement wood bins of the four-year-old, six-story brick tenement and spread quickly up the steep stairwell, trapping many of those living in the uppermost apartments. Of the nine people killed in the blaze, one had lived on the third floor, two on the fourth, and five on the fifth. Many of those on the top floors survived only by jumping twenty-five feet from a fifth-floor apartment window down to the roof of a two-story building next door.<sup>41</sup>

As deadly fires continued to plague the city's tenement districts, the legislature in 1862 enacted a law mandating that *all* buildings housing eight or more families install fire escapes. By 1865, nearly half the Sixth Ward's tenements had them, although many landlords ignored the requirement, and smaller buildings were still exempted. One of these was the



Sleeping outdoors to avoid the tenement heat. Frank Leslie's *Illustrated Newspaper* (August 12, 1882): 392-93. Collection of the Library of Congress.

two-and-a-half-story wooden tenement at 15 Baxter Street, where in 1863 a fire killed three women and one child. The blaze started late at night and spread upstairs to the crowded attic, whose inhabitants "became frantic with fear, and rent the stillness of midnight with their piercing shrieks, rendering the scene one of horror and despair." Mrs. Collins and her lodgers, Mr. and Mrs. Sands, jumped safely to the street from their front attic room, though Mr. Sands suffered serious burns. In the other attic rooms, where Bridget Tierney kept eleven boarders, four died in the blaze. The dead included Alice Murphy, thirty-five, and her daughter aged four; Sarah Gray, thirty-five, and Mary Jane McMasters, about thirty, found dead

in her bed. Gray's eleven-year-old son and McMasters's fifteen-year-old son survived by jumping to the roof of a rear building. The *Herald* reported that "Hugh Devier and his wife Catharine, who is blind, embraced each other and jumped from the window together, and miraculously escaped with only a few bruises." Tierney later testified that those who perished could also have jumped "had they not been under the influence of liquor." An African-American man living in a first-floor rear apartment and a female Irish immigrant living above him blamed each other for starting the blaze. Other tenants testified that both had been drunk and therefore could not be trusted to remember what had happened. Fire was a constant threat and concern to Five Points residents, one they knew could end their lives at any moment.<sup>42</sup>

**"FOR MISERY, DEGRADATION, FILTH,  
AND MULTITUDES THEY CANNOT BE EXCEEDED"**

The worst tenements in Five Points were the Old Brewery and those in Cow Bay. As one antebellum writer noted, the Old Brewery and Cow Bay together comprised "the two most famous spots in this dark region. For misery, degradation, filth, and multitudes they cannot be exceeded."<sup>43</sup> Cow Bay was the nickname of the portion of Little Water Street (later Mission Place) that ran north from Worth. It was actually a cul-de-sac, thirty feet wide at the entrance, but "narrowing, with crooked, uneven lines, back to a point about a hundred feet from the entrance," where the street abruptly ended surrounded by decrepit wooden tenements. Reputed to have once been a cow path used by local cattlemen to reach the Collect Pond, Cow Bay by the late 1840s rivaled the Old Brewery for "the extreme wretchedness which abounds on every hand." After the demolition of the Old Brewery in 1852, journalists could describe Cow Bay as "the very lowest and worst place in New-York."<sup>44</sup>

Saloons frequented by the most dangerous characters, even by Five Points standards, occupied the front ground-floor room of virtually every building in Cow Bay. In addition, the tenements were home to an especially heterogeneous mixture of races and nationalities. Blacks had originally dominated the infamous block, especially chimney sweeps, who constituted a significant portion of the city's African-American population. As late as 1849, one newspaper claimed that four hundred blacks

lived in five Cow Bay tenements. While this was probably an exaggeration, it nonetheless indicates their long-standing presence there. At midcentury, journalist George Foster noted that Cow Bay "is chiefly celebrated in profane history as being the battle-field of the negroes and police. . . . Two memorable occasions, at least, have recently occurred in which 'Cow Bay' was rendered classic ground by the set fights which took place within its purlieus between the police and the fighting-men of the Ethiopian tribes." During the 1850s, however, the black presence at Cow Bay diminished rapidly. The number of African Americans recorded by census takers fell from one hundred twenty in 1850 to thirty-five in 1855. During the 1850s, Italians and Kerry Irish, "the poorest of the city poor," filled these "dens of misery" left vacant by the black exodus. The prostitutes, thieves, alcoholics, and interracial couples who concentrated in Cow Bay added to its scandalous reputation.<sup>45</sup>

Cow Bay horror stories abounded. The superintendent of the Five Points House of Industry led a tour of Cow Bay that found "a number of both sexes, huddled together like swine—some almost in a state of nudity. Not the slightest shame was apparent at their exposure before each other, nor before the visitors. The stench in this garret was most intolerable," caused by "a perfect cesspool of ordure, in a corner." Violent fights, sometimes ending in death, and typically alcohol-induced, were also common.<sup>46</sup>

The poor found Cow Bay equally offensive. Tom Nolan told those attending a Five Points temperance meeting that if they wanted to see the Cow Bay building he had lived in during his drinking days, "saturate your handkerchief with camphor, so that you can endure the horrid stench, and enter. Grope your way through the long, narrow passage—turn to the right up the dark and dangerous stairway; be careful where you place your foot around the lower step, or in the corners of the broad stairs, for it is more than shoe-mouth deep of steaming filth."<sup>47</sup>

Cow Bay may have been as crowded as the Old Brewery. Two married couples plus a female lodger who "sometimes has company" lived in the ten-by-twelve-foot back room of one three-room apartment. Five men and women lived in the front room, which measured eight by fourteen feet. The windowless middle room, a mere six by seven, was occupied by a lone woman. In the apartment above this one, with identical dimensions, the back room held a German widow with two boys, a black husband and wife, and a female lodger. The dark, tiny center room held a German woman,

her black husband, and a four-year-old white "lodger," perhaps an orphan. Incredibly, these were not even the most crowded Cow Bay dwellings. An 1857 inspection found 23 families—179 people in all—living in just 15 rooms.<sup>48</sup>

Although they received far less publicity at this point than the Old Brewery or Cow Bay, the tenements along the east side of Baxter Street just north of the Five Points intersection were nearly as miserable. After demolition crews tore down most of the Cow Bay hovels to make room for an expanded Five Points House of Industry in the 1860s, this became the most notorious portion of the neighborhood. The block where these tenements were located, bounded by Baxter, Bayard, Mulberry, and Park Streets, would eventually become known as "Mulberry Bend." Mulberry Bend represented to postbellum Americans the same depravity and squalor that prewar New Yorkers associated with Cow Bay and the Old Brewery. But even in the 1850s, conditions in Mulberry Bend were already miserable. Bottle Alley, the courtyard at the rear of 47 and 49 Baxter Street that *Harper's Weekly* and Jacob Riis would make famous in the 1880s and 1890s, had a nasty reputation in the antebellum era. Longtime New Yorker Charles Haswell remembered that even in the 1840s, Bottle Alley had been a favorite haunt of murderers and thieves. No descriptions of the Bottle Alley tenements themselves survive from the antebellum period. We do know, however, that recent Sligo immigrants concentrated there.

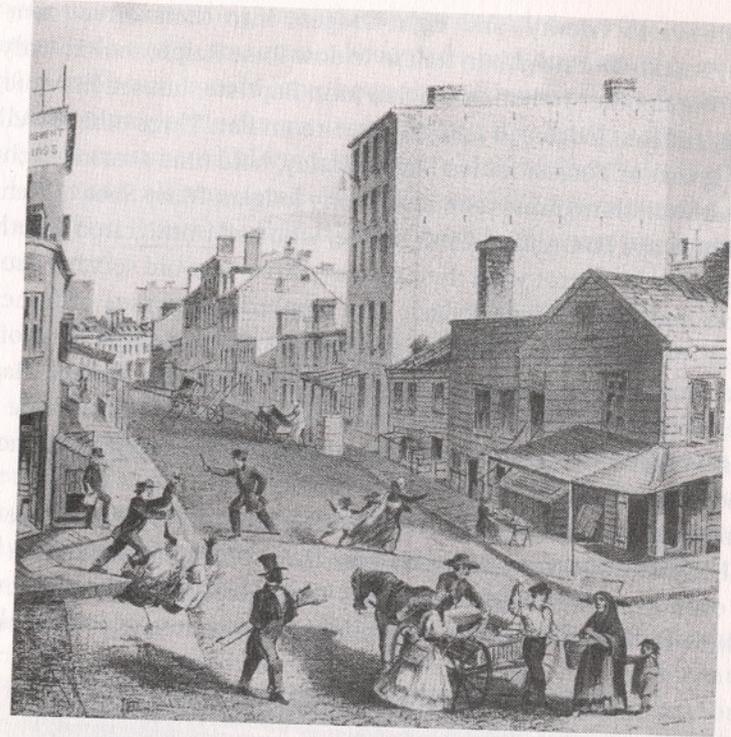
Conditions deteriorated as one moved down Baxter Street from Bottle Alley toward the Five Points intersection. At 39 Baxter, whose front and rear wooden tenements were dominated by Lansdowne immigrants, an investigative committee in the mid-1850s found fifteen people living in a single room measuring fifteen by fourteen feet and with a ceiling only seven feet high. Yet that was an improvement over the late 1840s, when 106 hogs had lodged there along with the human tenants. One Lansdowne immigrant, laundress Barbara Sullivan, squeezed herself, six children, a son-in-law, and six boarders into a single apartment. Ellen Holland lived here as well.<sup>49</sup>

Next door, at 37½ Baxter, the legislative inspectors discovered the usual windowless bedrooms and destitute tenants. Particularly appalling were the circumstances of Honora Moriarty and her teenaged daughters Margaret and Mary, also probably Lansdowne immigrants. The "old dame of sixty" and her two daughters, the legislators reported in horror, "sup-

ported themselves by picking curled hair" out of city garbage barrels and then selling it to wigmakers or other manufacturers. By scouring the streets sixteen hours a day, they managed to find enough hair to earn five dollars per week.<sup>50</sup>

A few doors down, at 35 Baxter, the dreadful conditions continued. "Down half a dozen rickety steps, the door was already open to one of the filthiest, blackest holes we had yet seen," wrote a *Times* reporter in 1859 of a nocturnal tour he took of the tenement's basement boardinghouse with a journalist from the *Express* and a police escort. The proprietor of this "damp and filthy cellar . . . with much loquacity, assured them that the bed-clothes were all 'clane and dacent sure,' that they were washed 'onst a week,' every Thursday, and that the place was quite sweet." Around the main room they saw "a number of wretched bunks, similar to those on shipboard, only not half as convenient, ranged around an apartment about ten feet square. Nearly every one of the half-dozen beds was occupied by one or more persons. No regard was paid to age or sex; but man, woman, and child were huddled up in one undistinguishable mass. . . . The most fetid odors were emitted, and the floor and the walls were damp with pestiferous exhalations. But this was not all. There were two inner apartments [i.e., bedrooms], each of which was crowded to the same capacity as the outer one. Not the slightest breath of air reached these infernal holes, which were absolutely stifling with heat." Inquiring about two small children sleeping soundly in one of the "hideous beds," the manager told the reporters that their older sister, who cared for them, "was out begging, even at this hour." The lodging house at 35 Baxter was actually superior to many others in the neighborhood. It charged six cents a night, far more than the worst dives. The landlord told the *Times* that he "lodged none under any circumstances but honest hardworking people—which statement the police received with smiles and without contradiction." "To do them justice," agreed the *Express* reporter, "such as were awake seemed to be quite sober." This was probably the establishment sarcastically referred to by the *New York Illustrated News* as "Mrs. Sandy Sullivan's Genteel Lodging-House on Baxter Street," operated by Lansdowne immigrants Sandy and Kate Sullivan. Former Lansdowne tenants occupied most of the other apartments in this wretched building and next door at 33 Baxter as well.<sup>51</sup>

Just before the corner, at 31 Baxter, one of the first five-story brick ten-



This 1859 view of Baxter Street above Worth shows the notorious tenements that lined the east side of that street. The large brick building at the center is 31 Baxter, whose three-room apartments were crammed full of Lansdowne immigrants and Italians. Sandy Sullivan's "Genteel Lodging-house" at 35 Baxter was in one of the two-story buildings just up the street, and 39 Baxter (where Ellen Holland lived) is the first three-story building visible. D. T. Valentine, comp., *Manual of the Corporation of the City of New York for 1860* (New York, 1860). Collection of the author.

ements in this part of the neighborhood towered over the surrounding wooden hovels. The investigators who detailed conditions in the neighboring tenements did not consider this relatively new building noteworthy, perhaps because it had not had much time to deteriorate. Yet the terrible crowding in its three-room apartments boggles the mind. Above the first two floors, most of the tenants were Lansdowne immigrants and Italians. Cornelius Shea and his wife Ellen, Lansdowne immigrants from Kenmare parish, shared their apartment with three children and four lodgers. Widow Johanna McCarty squeezed her four children (ranging in

age from six to twenty) and eight lodgers into their three-room flat. McCarty's next-door neighbor, Italian widow Rose Ralph, took in only four lodgers. But another Italian, musician John Baptiste, housed his wife, five children, and four lodgers in a single three-room flat. Three other dwellings, including that of Tuosist native Daniel Haley, held nine persons each. Not all Lansdowne immigrants took in so many lodgers. Mary Shea of Kenmare and her husband Jeremiah, a Cork native, who had immigrated together in 1852, lived at 31 Baxter with their twenty-three-year-old servant daughter Margaret and just a single lodger. The combined incomes of father and daughter, plus the rent from the one lodger, allowed them to avoid the intense crowding endured by their neighbors. Laborer Daniel Hagerty, another Lansdowne immigrant from Kenmare, lived with his wife Mary and his younger brother Patrick, also a laborer. Their combined incomes allowed them to shun boarders altogether.<sup>52</sup>

The most notorious tenements in antebellum Five Points were not typical. Conditions varied enormously from block to block, and sometimes even from building to building. Some streets—such as White and Franklin west of Baxter, and Mott south of Pell—were rarely mentioned by



BACKGROUNDS OF CIVILIZATION.—MRS. SANDY SULLIVAN'S GENTEEL LODGING-HOUSE IN BAXTER STREET.—See page 219.

"Mrs. Sandy Sullivan's Genteel Lodging-House" at 35 Baxter Street was one of many boardinghouses in Five Points run by Lansdowne immigrants from County Kerry. *New York Illustrated News* (February 18, 1860): 216. Collection of the author.

investigators chronicling woeful tenement conditions. On some of these streets, a lone couple sometimes occupied a building that, if located just a block or two away, would have housed six or even twelve families. Still, with six or more people occupying nearly half the district's two-room, 225-square-foot apartments, along with a stove, a table and chairs, beds, clothing, food, and all the families' other worldly possessions, even the "average" Five Points apartment would have been a very unpleasant place to live.

#### "CONSIDERABLE REMAINS OF CLANSHIP AMONG THESE MOUNTAINEERS"

I have already noted the strength of the ethnic ties that drew certain groups to certain blocks of Five Points. Even more striking is that ethnic bands held together on a building-by-building basis. Few whole blocks were ethnically homogeneous. Each generally contained a clutch of almost exclusively Irish buildings and some others dominated by Germans. In five sample blocks, 82 percent of the buildings in which the Irish constituted a majority had no more than a single non-Irish family. And 90 percent of the buildings in which Germans made up the majority contained no more than one non-German family. In 78 percent of the tenements, one ethnic group made up 75 percent or more of the inhabitants.<sup>53</sup>

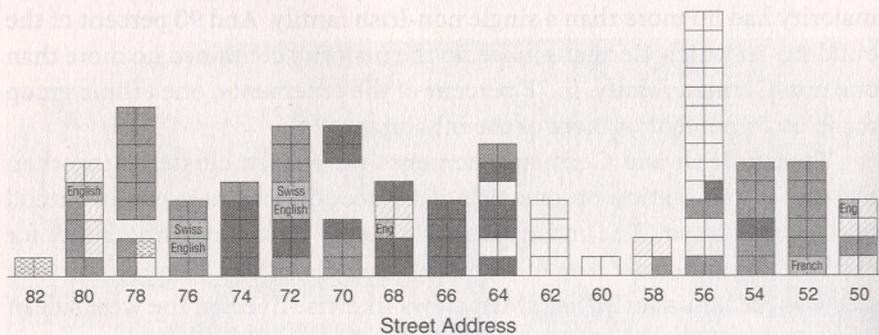
Though Irish and German tenements were often clustered together, the ethnic aggregation on one side of a street did not necessarily extend itself to the other. The most German "block" in the neighborhood, for example, was the east side of Mott between Canal and Bayard; the west side was predominantly Irish. Many Jews likewise lived on the west side of Baxter below Worth, but virtually none lived across the street.<sup>54</sup>

Racial segregation in Five Points was even more pronounced than ethnic clustering. Those African Americans who remained in Five Points tended to live in all-black tenements. Park Street between Baxter and Mott contained the largest proportion of such buildings, as several of the small houses on each of these blocks were boardinghouses that catered to blacks. African Americans also concentrated in Cow Bay, as well as in scattered houses on Baxter, Mulberry, and Pell Streets. If the census taker is to be believed, racial segregation in Five Points was almost absolute.<sup>55</sup>

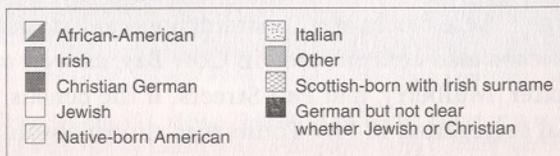
Although ethnic and racial residential patterns are easiest to docu-

ment, *intraethnic* housing patterns developed as well. The dominant Irish contingents in the neighborhood—those from Sligo, Cork, and Kerry—often concentrated in mini-enclaves. The Kerry immigrants were the most clannish, with 84 percent of them living in just two of the neighborhood's twenty blocks. These two blocks, Baxter from Worth to Leonard and Worth from Centre to Baxter (including Cow Bay), were two of the five blocks whose confluence formed the Five Points intersection. Kerry immigrants dominated those streets. Sixty-four percent of the Irish Catholic residents identified on these two blocks were Kerry natives; and 79 percent of these Kerry natives had emigrated from the Lansdowne estate. Callaghan McCarthy, a Catholic priest in the isolated Lansdowne parish of Tuosist, told a visitor to Kerry that "there existed considerable remains of clanship among these mountaineers" and "strong family attachments." These bonds remained potent in New York.<sup>56</sup>

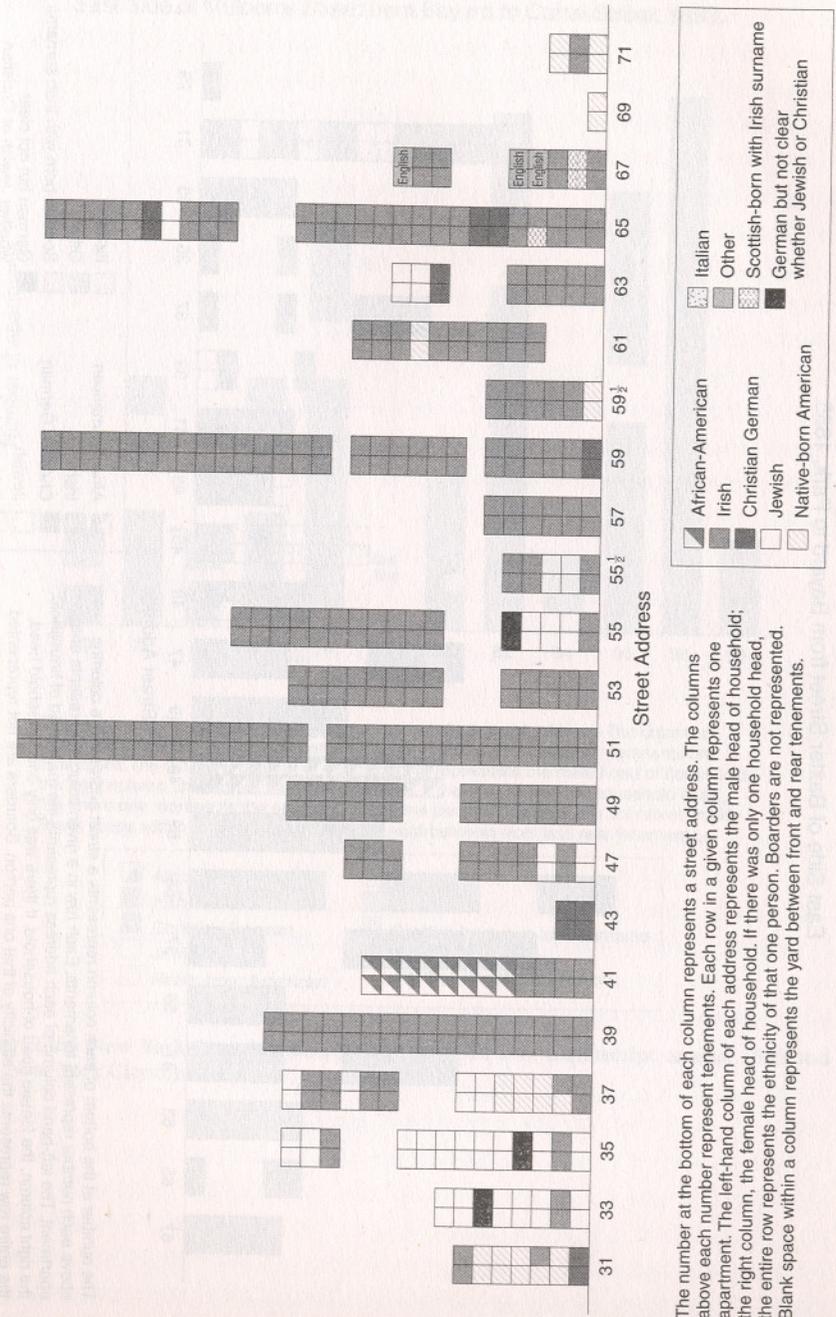
Ethnicity of Five Points Tenement Dwellers  
East Side of Mott Street from Canal Street to Bayard Street, 1855



The number at the bottom of each column represents a street address. The columns above each number represent tenements. Each row in a given column represents one apartment. The left-hand column of each address represents the male head of household; the right column, the female head of household. If there was only one household head, the entire row represents the ethnicity of that one person. Boarders are not represented. Blank space within a column represents the yard between front and rear tenements.

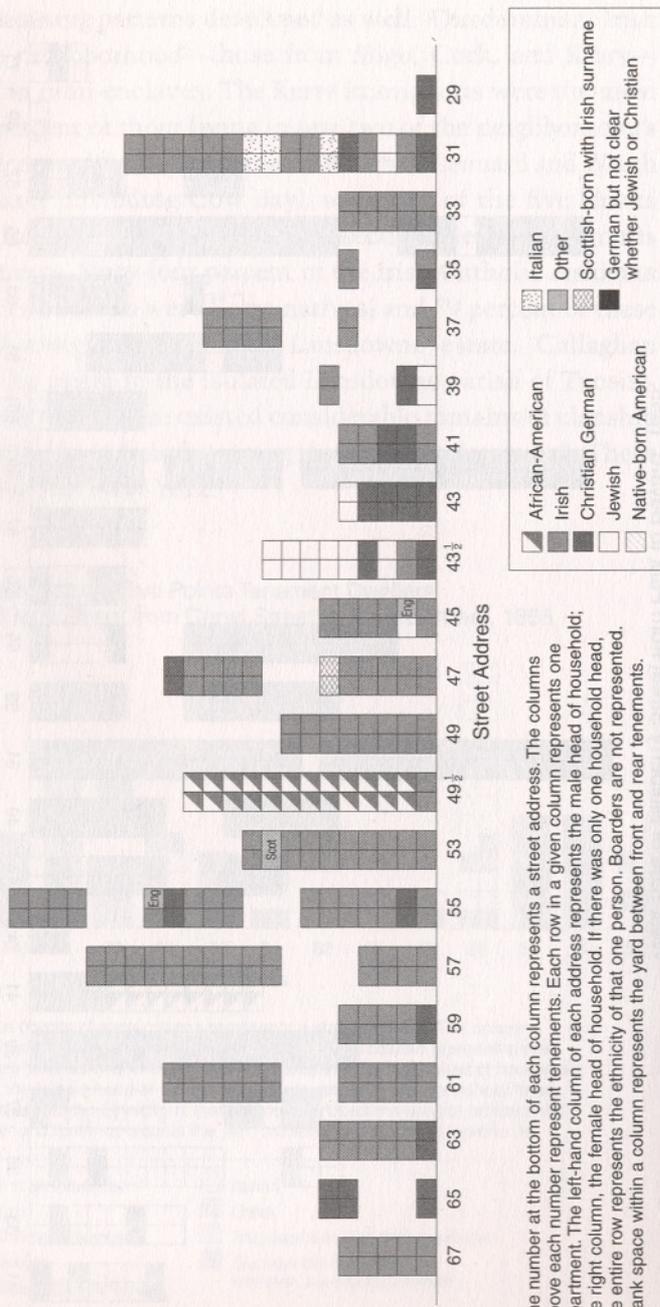


West Side of Mulberry Street from Park to Bayard, 1855.



The number at the bottom of each column represents a street address. The columns above each number represent tenements. Each row in a given column represents one apartment. The left-hand column of each address represents the male head of household; the right column, the female head of household. If there was only one household head, the entire row represents the ethnicity of that one person. Boarders are not represented. Blank space within a column represents the yard between front and rear tenements.

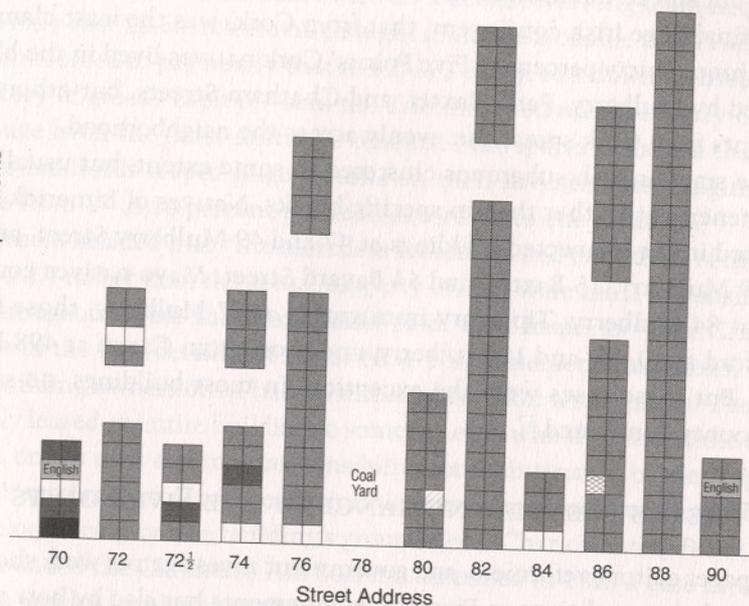
East Side of Baxter Street from Bayard to Park, 1855.



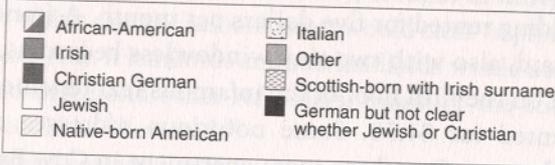
The number at the bottom of each column represents a street address. The columns above each number represent tenements. Each row in a given column represents one apartment. The left-hand column of each address represents the male head of household; the right column, the female head of household. If there was only one household head, the entire row represents the ethnicity of that one person. Boarders are not represented. Blank space within a column represents the yard between front and rear tenements.

East Side of Mulberry Street from Bayard to Canal Street, 1860.

Number of Apartments



The number at the bottom of each column represents a street address. The columns above each number represent tenements. Each row in a given column represents one apartment. The left-hand column of each address represents the male head of household; the right column, the female head of household. If there was only one household head, the entire row represents the ethnicity of that one person. Boarders are not represented. Blank space within a column represents the yard between front and rear tenements.



Source: 1855 New York State manuscript census; 1860 U.S. manuscript census; 1855 and 1860 New York City directories.

Sligo natives, in contrast, did not concentrate as compactly as did the Kerry immigrants. They settled primarily in the northern half of Five Points, but spread themselves out over a twelve-block area. The neighborhood's final large Irish contingent, that from Cork, was the least clannish of the three. Thirty percent of Five Points' Cork natives lived in the block bounded by Mulberry, Park, Baxter, and Chatham Streets, but otherwise emigrants from Cork spread out evenly across the neighborhood.

The smaller Irish subgroups clustered to some extent, but usually in single tenements rather than in specific blocks. Natives of Limerick concentrated in the connected buildings at 47 and 49 Mulberry Street, and at 7 and 9 Mulberry, 15 Baxter, and 64 Bayard Street. Mayo natives congregated at 84 Mulberry, Tipperary immigrants at 77 Mulberry, those from Waterford at 10, 11, and 12 Mulberry, and those from Cavan at 498 Pearl Street. But these cases were the exception. In most buildings, no single Irish county dominated.<sup>57</sup>

#### "THE PESTILENTIAL NUISANCE OF THE FIVE POINTS"

Newspaper editors, reformers, and government investigators were shocked not merely by conditions in Five Points tenements but also by how much tenants had to pay to rent them. Two-room apartments in the worst buildings generally rented for four to five dollars per month in the mid-1850s. Three rooms cost \$5 to \$6.50. In the rear wooden tenement at 37½ Baxter, a three-room apartment (two of which were windowless bedrooms) in the back of the building rented for five dollars per month. A front apartment that faced the yard, also with two tiny windowless bedrooms, cost \$6.50. A two-room flat on the fifth floor of the infamous rear tenement at 9 Mulberry Street rented for \$4.50. Some notorious addresses commanded surprisingly high rents. One three-room apartment in Cow Bay rented for ten dollars a month in the late 1850s, apparently because only one of the three rooms was a small windowless "sleeping closet." A single fifteen-by-fourteen-foot room with a seven-foot ceiling at 39 Baxter cost six dollars a month. Basements, in contrast, were the least-expensive dwellings. A cellar apartment in the rear of 9 Mulberry rented for three dollars per month. For that price one could also rent a shed in the backyard at 17 Baxter. But apartments in better buildings cost more. A two-room apartment in the new "model tenement" at 34 Baxter cost seven dollars per

month. Figures compiled by the House of Industry also suggest that seven dollars was the typical rent for an average Five Points apartment.<sup>58</sup>

Because a three-room apartment in a decent working-class neighborhood only cost \$8.50, reformers thought it unconscionable that Five Pointers were forced to pay nearly that much in a filthy, run-down district. "The old story of greedy capital," said the *Tribune*, motivated property owners to gouge even the most destitute tenants. Newspapers charged that Five Points landlords reaped huge returns on their investments, ranging anywhere from 17 to 26 percent per year, according to one estimate.<sup>59</sup>

Others insisted that "the merciless inflictions and extortions of the *sub-landlord*," rather than the actual property owner, were most responsible for the outrageous rents the immigrants paid. City Inspector John Griscom, author of the first detailed study of New York tenement conditions, noted that building owners often had no direct interaction with renters. They frequently leased an entire building to someone else, who then sublet the apartments on his own and took responsibility for maintenance of the property. These "sub-landlords" were often immigrants, sometimes proprietors of the saloon or grocery on the building's ground floor. Charles Loring Brace, who later founded the Children's Aid Society, described in 1853 a case in which the sub-landlord, rather than the property owner, reaped huge profits. According to Brace, a "notorious rum-seller" rented eight Five Points houses for \$125 each per year from the property owner. "These he lets out to the prostitutes and negroes. They are filthy, broken-down, miserable, beyond any houses in the City." One of the buildings, in Cow Bay, brought in thirty dollars rent in one month, at which rate the saloonkeeper would clear "a profit of *nearly 300 per cent*" for the year. If landlords and sub-landlords would accept "a rational profit," argued Brace and other reformers, much of the suffering in New York's slums could be alleviated.<sup>60</sup>

Landlords and sub-landlords, of course, insisted that blame for the conditions and high rents in their buildings lay elsewhere. Samuel Weeks, a landlord who lived on Mott Street for almost all his life, complained that when he constructed new buildings at 47 and 49 Mott, the tenants immediately began taking in lodgers, overtaxing the buildings' facilities and making the tenements overcrowded and filthy. Weeks testified that he lowered the rents by 25 percent to discourage his tenants from taking in boarders, but they continued to do so anyway. Only when immigrants' wages improved, Weeks implied, would they be able to pay a reasonable

rent and live in decent dwellings. Other landlords argued that high rents resulted from the city's seemingly perpetual shortage of housing, and could not be blamed on individual property owners who merely charged the market rate. In any case, surviving Five Points rent ledgers indicate that tenements did not typically generate outrageous profits for their owners.<sup>61</sup>

These ledgers also demonstrate that even scraping together four or five dollars in rent was a challenge for poor Five Pointers. Tenants rarely paid their rent on time. The tiny front and rear wooden houses at 70 Mott Street, for example, had five apartments whose rents ranged from four dollars to nine. Only the tenant in the cheapest apartment, Irish immigrant glass peddler Andrew McDermott, consistently paid his on time. Painter Robert Hall, a New York native who lived in the nine-dollar apartment with his wife and six children, was consistently six weeks behind on his payments. Carpenter Patrick Farmer paid his rent close to the due date in the spring and summer when construction work was plentiful, but in the winter tended to fall weeks behind. Furthest in arrears was an Irish-born menial laborer, William Trainor, who lived with his wife, three children, and a boarder. He too could rarely pay in the winter, falling four months behind in both April 1849 and April 1850. The property agents did not evict Trainor despite his consistent delinquency, indicating either that the expense involved did not justify such extreme measures or that they sympathized with his plight. The agents paid \$13.56 in fees to evict a tenant in another Five Points building, a cost far greater than the interest lost allowing Trainor to pay his back rent at midyear when he could find steadier employment.<sup>62</sup>

Some argued that only governmental regulation could reduce rents and improve conditions in the city's decrepit tenements. "Tear down the rookeries," demanded the *New York Express*, "and let there be proper supervision, under authority of law, over the construction of whatever buildings may be erected in the future." But pervasive laissez-faire attitudes made tenement regulation seem radical to antebellum Americans. Supporters of regulation attempted to address this objection. "Why can the accommodations on a ship be regulated when they are only used for a few weeks," asked the *Tribune*, "but not for homes where people live for months or years?" Nonetheless, the movement for tenement regulation made little headway in the prewar years.<sup>63</sup>

Others offered solutions even more radical than regulation. Anticipating by more than five decades the eventual fate of the southern and west-

ern sections of the Five Points neighborhood, the *Herald* suggested that city officials raze "all that nest of drunkenness, roguery, debauchery, vice and pestilence, moral and physical, which lies between Centre street and Chatham Square—that is to say, the locality known as the Five Points and its dependencies." The city could then build a new post office as well as state and federal courts in its place. The *Herald* predicted that such a project would double property values in the surrounding area while allowing the city to "abolish the pestilential nuisance of the Five Points" once and for all. Yet such projects were considered too expensive and too intrusive on the rights of property owners to merit serious consideration. It would take another half century before New Yorkers would consent to use such drastic measures in the "battle with the slum."<sup>64</sup>

Unable to effect real change, civic leaders attempted to improve the neighborhood's image instead. At the end of 1854, city officials changed the names of the most infamous Five Points streets, in the hope that by simply expunging their notorious names from city maps they could initiate the revitalization of the district. The three streets whose confluence made up the Five Points intersection, as well a fourth nearby that ran up to Cow Bay, were all renamed. Cross Street became Park, Anthony was rechristened Worth, Orange was transformed into Baxter, and Little Water became Mission Place, named for the Five Points Mission which Methodists opened there in 1850. Yet "the shamelessness of Five Points" and the suffering of its "degraded denizens" remained all too much the same.<sup>65</sup>

Recognizing that new street names were not enough, those working in Five Points to aid the neighborhood's many destitute residents stepped up their efforts in the early 1850s. One of the first to devote himself full time to their plight was a minister, Lewis N. Pease. The Ladies' Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church hired Pease in 1850 to visit Five Pointers in their homes and convert them to Methodism. It was the lack of the moral compass provided by Protestant Christianity, Pease's employers believed, that led residents to dissolute lives of drunkenness, crime, and prostitution. Only a devotion to the teachings of Christ through Bible study could fortify Five Pointers to resist these temptations. But the Five Pointers themselves repeatedly told Pease that their problem was not a lack of morals, but a lack of work. "'Don't talk to us of death and retribution and perdition before us,'" they implored him. "'Tell us some way of escape! Give us work and wages!'"<sup>66</sup>