4

PROLOGUE

The Saga of Johnny Morrow, the Street Peddler

Of the hundreds of thousands of immigrants who passed through Five Points during the nineteenth century, precious few left written records. There are plenty of eyewitness accounts from reformers, journalists, law enforcement officials, and the like, but other than the occasional letter to the editor or affidavit describing a crime, working-class Five Pointers speak directly to us very rarely. A few have managed to narrate their own stories. Perhaps the most fascinating of these is the only one from the pre–Civil War years: a memoir, written by a teenager, of alcoholism, abuse, and life on the streets.[1]

His name was John Morrow, and he was born in about 1844 to Protestant parents in a village not far from Liverpool, England. He was the third of four children born to a Scottish father, an architect, and an English mother. John remembered his early years as carefree and happy, though when still a young boy he severely injured his left leg in a fall from a swing. The wound (perhaps a bad break) never properly healed, leaving his left leg lame for life. By the time he was full grown, it was three inches shorter than the right.

Far more traumatic to Johnny than his accident was the death of his mother when he was about five. His father remained single for quite some time, but finally remarried. Johnny recalled that his stepmother treated him and his three siblings quite well until she had children of her own, by which point she and his father were fighting a lot. "He would often spend the night away from home, carousing with a few companions, spending in this way much of his hard-earned money; and she would manage, while he was at his daily work, to drink a great deal of whiskey." Soon she "entirely

neglected her household duties, left the table in disorder, the cow unmilked, the children uncared-for, and indeed often entertained carousing friends against father's will. Finally, in a fit of passion at her conduct, he declared that he would leave the homestead, and emigrate to America, in hopes that a change in circumstances would make things better." He sold everything they owned, left Johnny's two older brothers at a free boarding school in Dublin, and took the remainder of the family (including a servant girl whose passage they paid) to New York.[2]

That the Morrows could afford a servant girl indicates that they were still relatively well off. But in New York, Johnny's father continued to drink rather than work. After two months, as their nest egg dwindled, he took Johnny out of school so the boy could scavenge firewood and coal to reduce the family's fuel expenses. After about six months in New York, despite having left England with substantial savings, Johnny's father was broke.[3]

Finding it impossible to work as an architect, he took a lowly seventy-five-cent-per-day job in a cabinetmaker's shop on Chatham Street on the outskirts of Five Points. Johnny's stepmother earned a few cents per day sewing shirts for garment manufacturers, as did his younger sister Annie. After work, his parents would drink away most of their earnings and beat the kids in frustration. After about a year in New York, Johnny's father found relatively high-paying work as a house carpenter, but his drinking kept him from holding any job for very long. To cut their expenses, he moved the family uptown to a one-room basement apartment at the corner of Tenth Avenue and 40th Street, a run-down district that would soon become known as "Hell's Kitchen."

Meanwhile, Johnny continued to scavenge for fuel. At times his father ordered him to steal nails from construction sites instead, because he needed the two cents a pound they brought from the neighborhood junk dealer to pay for his brandy. "He soon became an almost helpless drunkard," wrote Johnny, "got out of work, out of money, and, consequently, out of bread. starve, was the word!" Time and again Johnny's father would take an oath of sobriety, but he always fell off the wagon. He pawned most of the family's possessions to help pay their mounting expenses, which continued to increase as they had more children. By the time Johnny was eleven, in about 1854, he and Annie slept head to toe in a single bed with their half siblings William, Jane, and Margaret Ann. Little Jonathan slept in his parents' bed.[4]

At about this point, Johnny was caught stealing lumber. Because of his lameness, he could not run fast enough to escape, and as a result was severely beaten. He came home and insisted he would steal no more, but suggested an alternative. During his days on the streets, he often came across children selling matches door to door. He had learned that the tiny peddlers would buy seventy-two boxes of matches wholesale for twenty-four cents. They took some matches out of each box and wrapped them with string into twenty-five additional bundles, selling the boxes and bundles for a penny a piece. His father consented to let Johnny try match peddling. On his first day he sold his entire stock, and returned home triumphantly with ninety-seven cents. His father spent most of the proceeds on brandy.[5]

Because of Johnny's success, his father stopped feeding him breakfast and lunch, insisting that he beg for meals from charitable customers. Soon his older brothers James and Robert, aged seventeen and fifteen, arrived from Dublin. They tried to make it on their own, but shortly moved into the one-room apartment with the rest of the family. Eventually they fought with their father over his drinking, moved out, and were never heard from again. Johnny continued to peddle matches, though he branched out into children's "picture-books" as well. Willie and Jane entered the profession too. Johnny would work one side of the street, Willie and Jane the other. But their father and mother continued to beat them if they did not come home with enough money to satisfy their addiction.

"My own position was now fast becoming unendurable," Johnny wrote. "I was liable at any time to be knocked about the room and beaten by my parents, and we children had to work very hard to earn money while they stayed in idleness at home, and drank away a large portion of our earnings." Johnny and Willie ran away, but three days later, their father found them and beat them "with a piece of clothes-line till the blood came trickling down." They ran away a second time a few weeks later, but a neighbor told their father where they were and he again dragged them home. When a kind man gave Johnny a $2.50 gold piece, he gave it to his father, hoping their sudden windfall would win his approval. The next morning, his father used it to buy a gallon of brandy. His father and stepmother spent the entire day in bed drunk.[6]

Johnny and Willie ran away once more, this time for good. To ensure that they would not be caught, they headed downtown to the Sixth Ward

and its Newsboys' Lodging House. The lodging house had been set up in the early 1850s by Charles Loring Brace's Children's Aid Society as a refuge for the hundreds of homeless newsboys, bootblacks, and child peddlers who lived on New York's streets. Before the house opened, these children generally slept in doorways and coal bins; now they could find shelter in a warm, spacious dormitory for just six cents a night.

When Willie and Johnny checked in, they told the superintendent that they were orphans. Johnny felt guilty, though, and the next day told their true story. He was shocked that the society did not inform his parents or try to convince them to return home. But there were dozens of boys in the lodging house who could have told virtually identical stories. The superintendent did mention Johnny's tale to a reporter, who published it in a religious newspaper, the *Independent*, under the title "The Boy Who Confessed His Sin." When Johnny's Sunday school teacher read the article and recognized his pupil, he insisted that Johnny come live with him in his rooms at the Union Theological Seminary on University Place. Johnny went back to school and supported himself by peddling to the seminarians and on the streets after class. Willie remained at the lodging house.

Remained there, that is, until about a month later when the police picked him up on the street late one night and took him to the House of Refuge, the city's orphan asylum on Randall's Island. Johnny begged the authorities to release Willie, but was told that he would stay until someone found him a proper home. Johnny's Sunday school teacher suggested that they find him one out west through the adoption program run jointly by the Children's Aid Society and the Five Points House of Industry. About three weeks later, in 1856, Willie boarded a train for Iowa.[7]

While Willie was at the House of Refuge, their father died and was buried in an unmarked grave in the city's Potter's Field. Not long afterward, after Willie had left for Iowa, Johnny's sister Annie came to the seminary, complaining that her stepmother was mistreating her. Johnny brought her to Rev. W. C. Van Meter, who managed the adoption program run by the Five Points Mission. He sent her to an adoptive family in Iowa City. Johnny tried to help his half sister Jane by setting her up once again as a peddler, but when he saw his stepmother beat her one day because she could not account for all of her merchandise, he decided to have her adopted as well. On the pretense of taking her to get new shoes, he brought her to the Five Points Mission to meet Reverend Van Meter. She told him

she would like a new home, and a few weeks later she was adopted by a family in Canton, Illinois. Her mother went to court to try to regain custody of the child, but was rebuffed.

Having lived at the seminary for some time, Johnny developed an ambition to go to college, Yale in particular. He moved to New Haven, where he lived at the Divinity School while supporting himself peddling to the students. In the summer of 1858, after about a year in New Haven, Johnny decided to go out west and find Willie, whom he had not heard from in almost a year. He traveled with Van Meter as far as Chicago, and then continued to Iowa City, where he found Annie living in a comfortable home. On a farm near "Fort Desmoines" he found Willie, who had been passed around to many families in the two years since he left New York. Johnny decided to bring him back to New Haven. On their way back they stopped in Illinois to visit Jane, who, like Annie, had found a good home.[8]

Willie eventually went back to the West with Van Meter, "to try his fortune again in some kind of family." The last he and Johnny saw of their stepmother, she was asleep on the bare floor of her apartment on West 17th Street with five-year-old Jonathan. Her only furniture was a pair of chairs. They took the little boy to New Haven, where they eventually put him up for adoption at the New Haven Orphan Asylum. Johnny remained in New Haven, still aspiring one day to study at Yale. With the help of some friends there, while only sixteen, he published his memoir in the hope that the proceeds might someday fund his college education.[9]

Johnny Morrow's story may seem extraordinary. Yet at any one time in Five Points there were dozens of boys who could tell similar tales. Over the course of the nineteenth century, thousands of neighborhood children went hungry, were abused by alcoholic parents, and were forced to work on the streets to support themselves or their families. Johnny Morrow's first sixteen years had been especially harrowing. But in the context of Five Points, what was unusual about his childhood was not his life on the streets but simply that he was given the opportunity to record it for posterity.

Johnny never did enroll at Yale. Just a year after he published *A Voice from the Newsboys*, he was dead. The cause was "[em]pyema," an accumulation of pus in the lungs probably associated with a bronchial infection. He was buried on May 26, 1861, in Evergreen Cemetery, Brooklyn.[10]

CHAPTER FOUR

How They Worked

PEDDLER. RAGPICKER. Junk dealer. Seamstress. Teamster. The New World offered a much wider array of jobs than had the Old. Yet most immigrants heading for Five Points would have disembarked from the emigrant vessel with little savings. They needed work desperately and could not be choosy. Some newcomers simply continued with the same vocation they had followed in Europe.[11] Others arrived in North America brimming with ambition and a determination to improve their occupational status. Owen Healy was one of the first starving tenants sent by Lord Palmerston to America in 1847. Upon his arrival in New York, the twenty-eight-year-old worked as a laborer, but was soon selling fruit. In 1853, when Healy opened an account at the Emigrant Savings Bank, he described himself as a "dealer in bottles." By 1855, the Five Pointer had reached what many Irish immigrants considered the pinnacle of success—the opening of his very own saloon. Healy must have possessed some business acumen, for in a few years he amassed in his bank account more than $700 (equivalent to about $11,000 today),[12] a princely sum to one who had been on the verge of starvation just eight years earlier. Few Five Pointers soared to financial success this quickly. Many found themselves locked in the lowest-paying occupations, such as laborer, tailor, shoemaker, or seamstress. But despite the hardships of such work and frequent unemployment, most Five Pointers found better work, higher pay, and more consistent employment than they had had before they came to America.[13]

"IN SUMMER THE MEN HAVE MOST WORK"

Five Pointers worked at an extraordinary variety of jobs, from actor to xylographic printer. There were few New York occupations that were not followed by at least one or two of the neighborhood's inhabitants. An analysis of their occupations in 1855, however, reveals certain distinct patterns:

Employment by Occupational Category, 1855[14]

	Percentage of Five Points Men	*Percentage of New York Men*
Professionals	0.4%	2%
Business owners	4	14
Petty entrepreneurs	2	1
Lower-status white-collar workers	4	9
Skilled manual workers	49	47
Unskilled workers	40	22
Difficult to classify	1	5

	Five Points Women	*All New York Women*
Needle trades	48%	21%
Household servants	25	67
Laundresses	8	5
Boardinghouse keepers	13	4
Miscellaneous	6	3

A Five Pointer was much less likely than the average New Yorker to work in a profession or own a business and far more likely to toil as an unskilled worker. There was an underrepresentation of Five Points men in lower-status white-collar work (mostly clerks), which is understandable, given that many immigrants lacked the reading, writing, and math skills necessary for such employment. Among women, there were fewer servants (who generally lived where they worked) because few Five Points families could afford live-in help. Instead, Five Points women concentrated in the needle trades (the lowest-paying work for women), primarily as seamstresses sewing shirts, but also as dress, cap, and vest makers as well.

Perhaps the most surprising of the employment figures is that for skilled male workers. The stereotypical image of the Five Points immigrant is of a menial laborer digging ditches with his pickax. Yet in Irish-dominated Five Points, a majority of men worked in higher-status occupations, albeit the lowest-paying ones. Five Points' skilled workers were disproportionately represented in such low-paying crafts as tailoring, shoemaking, and glass repair, and significantly underrepresented in the highest-paying ones, such as shipbuilding, woodworking, food preparation, and the construction trades. The same pattern is evident in the unskilled labor category. Eighty percent of Five Points' unskilled workers were menial manual laborers, compared with only 59 percent in the entire city. The remainder of the city's unskilled workers held jobs as carters, drivers, hostlers, sailors, waiters, and watchmen, occupations with better working conditions, superior pay, and less seasonal unemployment.[15]

There were ethnic differences among Five Points workers as well. More than half the Irish were unskilled workers, compared to only one in twenty-five Germans. Most of the unskilled workers among the American-born population were African Americans or the children of Irish immigrants. Many of the skilled workers among the American-born, however, held relatively prestigious and high-paying jobs. Five Points butchers tended to be American natives. A disproportionate number of the printers and building tradesmen were also native-born. In contrast, skilled Jews toiled overwhelmingly as tailors and glaziers, the latter mostly wandering repairmen rather than highly paid construction workers.[16]

It is hardly surprising that Irish immigrants held lower-paying, lower-status jobs than their native- or German-born counterparts. Yet the Five Points Irish were even more likely to work as menial day laborers than other Irish New Yorkers. Five Points Irish male workers were almost twice as likely to toil as laborers, but only half as likely to hold positions in the high-paying construction and food-service trades. Similarly, Five Points Irishwomen were three times more likely to work as miserably paid seamstresses than Irishwomen throughout the city. The same pattern held for other ethnic groups. Five Points German men were twice as likely to be tailors as Germans citywide, and significantly less likely to work in the lucrative building and food-service industries.

So many clothing workers lived in Five Points because the cheap retail clothing business centered upon Baxter and Chatham Streets. Five Points

was also the home of a large proportion of the city's Jews, particularly Polish Jews, who were especially likely to work in the garment trade. The German and Polish Jewish immigrants who settled in New York tended to come from cities or towns where they had plied urban trades and saved significant sums of money before leaving for America. Most of the Irish, in contrast, had toiled as rural agricultural workers and thus brought no job skills with them to the United States.

The need for expensive tools also contributed to Five Pointers' inability to work in better-paying trades. Tailoring, in contrast, required very little equipment before the widespread use of the sewing machine, and may have therefore attracted many Five Pointers. Immigrants also had trouble breaking into some trades because native-born workers conspired to keep foreigners out. Butchering and shipbuilding, for example, were generally closed to the Irish. Such discrimination cost the Irish dearly, for a day laborer generally earned about a dollar a day in the 1850s, and Five Points' tailors and shoemakers made little more. In comparison, a carpenter could command eight to nine dollars a week, a baker nine to ten dollars, a cabinetmaker as much as ten dollars, and a ship's carpenter twelve to fifteen dollars per week.[17]

Five Pointers must have found this pay disparity especially galling because many higher-paying industries were located right in their neighborhood. Manufacturing of almost every variety flourished in the Sixth Ward, especially on Chatham Square and Chatham Street. Many small-scale manufacturers were also located on Doyer, Bayard, and Elizabeth Streets in the 1850s. Small factories produced silverware, jewelry, billiard tables, umbrellas, lightning rods, false teeth, patent medicines, and firearms. There were even four piano factories. Carriage and inexpensive furniture manufactories abounded as well on Chatham Square. Yet relatively few Five Pointers worked for these businesses.[18]

Five Pointers' jobs were especially prone to seasonal layoffs. A day laborer could expect to work no more than four days in a typical six-day workweek. Employment was usually scarce in the winter and especially brisk in the spring and summer, but a spell of cold or rain could bring unemployment at any moment. Employment in the garment trade also varied seasonally. In the dressmaking business, for example, jobs for women fell 75 percent after the autumn rush each year. This was probably an extreme case, but observers agreed that needleworkers suffered significant under- or unemployment in the slack winter months.[19]

The bank accounts of Five Pointers clearly reflect these seasonal highs and lows. Aside from a spike in January (the result perhaps of New Year's savings resolutions or the bank's dividend payment schedule), deposits during the summer and early fall ran far ahead of those in the rest of the year. Five Pointers made almost three times as many deposits per month in July and August as they did in February, March, and April. Although the "transportation revolution" of the 1830s and 1840s ended New York's reliance on potentially frozen waterways for the importation of raw materials and the distribution of finished products, seasonal employment swings continued to define the economic lives of Five Pointers throughout the nineteenth century.[20]

These seasonal fluctuations rippled throughout the economy. A survey of the "china business" (the selling of earthenware cups and plates) found that citywide, trade was most brisk in the spring "when people go to housekeeping" and at Christmas when they bought presents. But a Five Points china dealer sold the most in the summer, said the report, "because her patrons are poor people, and in summer the men have most work, and their expenses are lighter—consequently the women have more money." Merchants usually had savings to fall back on when business dried up, but the most poorly paid manual workers often had none. "Mechanics and laborers lived awhile on scanty savings of the preceding Summer and Autumn," recalled *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley in his memoirs, "then on such credit as they could wring from grocers and landlords, till milder weather brought them work." The unemployed might look for work at the "Labor Exchange" run by the New York Commissioners of Emigration, located first at the northern edge of Five Points on Canal Street and later at its western fringe on Worth Street, but few workers other than domestic servants found employment there. There were also commercial employment agencies, but immigrants balked at paying their fees. Consequently, despite improvements in the nation's transportation network that helped mitigate some of the ups and downs of the seasonal economy, Five Points' charitable workers reported well into the 1850s that chronic unemployment made winter the "annual season of sorrow and dread."[21]

During the lean winter months, the entire family often pitched in to help make ends meet. "If [the husband is] discharged from labor, and in actual want," reported the New York Association for Improving the Con-

dition of the Poor, "the wife can wash and scrub, [while] the children pick up fuel, and beg cast-off clothing and broken victuals." Struggling Five Points families could also secure loans from pawnshops. There were no more pawnshops in Five Points than in other portions of the city, perhaps due to the strict and expensive licensing involved. Yet the neighborhood's dozens of "second-hand" and junk shops located on Baxter Street served as informal pawnshops, buying whatever objects of value (such as empty bottles or scrap metal) area residents might find or steal. With the whole family helping out, most Five Pointers managed to scrape by each winter, though many suffered terribly until employment picked up in the spring.[22]

When they could find work, Five Pointers generally labored for ten hours each day, six days per week. The antebellum workday typically began at 7:00 a.m., was suspended for a one-hour "dinner" break at noon, and then continued until 6:00 p.m. Because seasonal unemployment was so common, scheduled days off were rare. Other than Sundays, work ceased only on New Year's Day, the Fourth of July, and Christmas (and for only some, Thanksgiving as well).

Long work days were nothing new to European immigrants, but they were startled by the productivity Americans expected. A British mechanic exaggerated only slightly when he commented that "there is no allowable cessation from labour during any part of this time—no lunching or watering time, or interval of any description; nothing but one round of work without the slightest intermission." Another English immigrant agreed that "'hurry up' is a phrase in the mouth of every person in the United States." German bricklayers found that while laying 1,000 to 1,200 bricks was an acceptable day's work in their native land, contractors expected 1,500 bricks per day in New York. When an English visitor, John White, told a New York Irish American that he should be happy earning "three times the Irish wages," the laborer complained that "he did six times the Irish work."[23]

"So great an amount of work for so little money"

It is very difficult to re-create the employment experiences of Five Points laborers and tradesmen. The tiny number of workingmen and -women who wrote extant memoirs and diaries did not hail from Five Points. But contemporary descriptions of the most widely followed neighborhood occupations do exist.

Tailoring, for example, was a family affair, most of the work being done in the tailor's tenement home. "Before we had sewing machines," recalled one immigrant garment worker decades later, "we worked piece-work with our wives, and very often our children. . . . We worked at home in our rooms. We had to buy fuel to heat the irons for pressing, and light in winter." Men did the most difficult work, such as sewing buttonholes and cutting the fabric, while wives and children completed tasks requiring less experience and training. Some Sixth Ward boardinghouse keepers subcontracted garment work from clothing manufacturers and then farmed it out to their tenants at a profit. Others came from outside the neighborhood to work in small clothing manufactories there. Mulberry Street was the headquarters for the neighborhood's needleworkers; 47 percent of them lived there during the early 1850s. In fact, a full third of the neighborhood's tailors lived on just one of Five Points' twenty blocks—Mulberry between Park and Bayard.[24]

The increasing tendency during the late antebellum period to farm out needlework to those who could toil at home, cooped up for long hours in sweltering apartments, led observers by 1850 to refer to such home workers as "sweaters" or "sweated labor." One such worker described "the miseries of New-York tailors" in a letter to the *New York Tribune*, stating that most in his trade were "half-paid" and "half-starved." Discussing immigrant weavers, who lived in circumstances similar to those of the tailors, the *Tribune* noted that miserable wages "compel them to exercise the most rigid economy and self-denial; and those who are burdened with large families find it *tight squeezing to keep the pot boiling.*"[25]

Because there were so many tailors in Five Points, the Journeymen Tailors' Protective Union held its weekly conclaves at the Sixth Ward Hotel—making it one of the city's few labor organizations to meet there. The tailors organized their union in mid-1850, calling a citywide general strike for higher wages in July. According to the *Herald*, they succeeded in winning "the moderate advance" they sought, though not every employer was willing to abide by the new rates. In Five Points, an angry mob of tailors attacked a needleworker taking garments from a Jewish clothing dealer on Chatham Street because he refused to accept the new pay scale. The tailors tried to take the unmade coats from the union buster, and police reinforcements were needed to subdue the irate mob. In subsequent years, the union was successful in organizing periodic strikes against individual

employers, such as one who in 1853 refused to pay the "standard wages on California goods." None of the tailors' union officers were Five Points residents (though its longtime secretary, Joseph Mathers, lived just across Chatham Square at 5 Dover Street), and it is impossible to determine how many neighborhood residents joined the organization. Nonetheless, so strongly did New Yorkers associate the garment trade with Five Points and vicinity that after its demise, labor leaders referred to the defunct union as "the old Sixth Ward Society."[26]

After tailoring, the next most popular skilled trade with Five Pointers was shoemaking. Like tailors, Five Points shoemakers were terribly underpaid. "There is no class of mechanics in New York who average so great an amount of work for so little money as the journeymen shoemakers," observed the *New York Tribune*. They "are the worst paid and live the least like . . . men who have spent years in learning trades." Most observers cited the competition of ready-made shoes and boots from New England as the cause of the shoemakers' woes. Like the tailors, the shoemakers tried to organize to improve their pay. Although the Boot and Shoemakers' Association met uptown, one of its subsidiary societies, the leather crimpers' union, met in Five Points at 9 Elizabeth Street. As long as hundreds of desperately impoverished immigrant tailors and cobblers continued to pour into New York, their unions would have little power to improve their wages significantly. By 1855, the foreign-born constituted 96 percent of both New York's 12,600 tailors and its 6,700 shoemakers.[27]

Tailoring and shoemaking were the skilled trades employing more New Yorkers than any other. Yet the third most popular skilled trade in Five Points—window glazing—was practiced by very few New Yorkers. Jews, mostly Polish natives, constituted more than 90 percent of Five Points' glaziers. Many Russian Jews, who began coming to New York soon after their Polish counterparts, spent time in London before continuing on to America, often learning the glazier's trade there. Some of Five Points' Polish Jews also resided in England before sailing for New York, but other Polish Jews must have learned the craft in Manhattan. Glaziers did not have shops, but instead walked the streets crying "Glass put in!" in order to drum up business. Wandering Jewish glaziers were a common sight all over pre–Civil War New York, and many of them lived in Five Points.[28]

Glaziers operated very much like peddlers, another favorite Five Points occupation. Although the stereotype of the period associated Jews with

this trade, Irish peddlers actually outnumbered Jewish ones in the neighborhood. By the 1850s, the peddler was a ubiquitous sight in the city, hawking anything that would bring a profit, including "suspenders, fiddle-strings, razor-strops, buttons, thread, dumb watches, pinchbeck jewelry, and pocketbooks." Ethnic specialization existed even among peddlers. African Americans sold buttermilk and straw for bedding. The Irish peddled seafood, crying, "Fresh sha-a-d!" or, "My clams I want to sell to-day; the best of clams from Rock-away." Some peddlers earned surprisingly good incomes. James Churchill, a Mayo native who had immigrated to New York in 1850 and lived on Baxter Street at the Five Points intersection, opened a bank account in 1852 with $90 and in a year had increased his savings to $160 (roughly $2,600 today). Those who enjoyed less success sometimes ventured out into the countryside with their wares. Jews who chose this strategy returned to their families only for Passover, Hanukkah, and the Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur High Holidays. Although peddlers enjoyed a modicum of independence, constant rejection by potential customers, harassment by children on the street, and miles of trudging through all sorts of weather made their lives especially hard.[29]

It was said that the aspiration of every peddler was to save enough money to open his own second-hand clothing store. Many of the neighborhood's peddlers specialized in old clothes, which they bought from indigent Five Pointers (especially those with a recently deceased family member) and resold to other district residents too poor to buy new garments. With enough success selling clothes door to door, many peddlers were able to settle down to ply their trade from storefronts. Given the number of second-hand stores and junk shops in Five Points, there must have been dozens of successful peddlers in the neighborhood. In 1850, nearly half of the hundred or so lots on Orange Street below Canal held a second-hand or junk shop. Below the Five Points intersection, Jews owned 80 percent of the Orange Street second-hand stores. Above it, more than 75 percent of the proprietors had obviously Irish surnames.[30]

Many of these dealers were notorious as "fences," those who bought stolen goods. Their shops "are generally second-hand stores and pawnbrokers' shops combined, where a little money is lent on a good deal, and where anything is purchased without the asking of impertinent questions," reported one journalistic exposé. "These shops are of course kept entirely by Jews," asserted another, "and are situated in a row, in Orange

street, near the Points." George Washington Appo, a professional thief, remembered that just after the Civil War "at No. 14½ Baxter St., was a second hand clothing store owned by a man named Cohen who was a 'fence' and where all the crooks used to get rid of their stolen goods." The *New York Evening Post* in 1854 accused second-hand dealer Mayer Rosenthal of 6 Mulberry of fencing half the stolen calico, muslin, shawls, silk, and thread in New York. There were Irish fences as well. One named Grady posed as a peddler, carrying his purloined property in a box suspended from his shoulders. When possible, fences altered stolen goods to make identification more difficult, relining coats and melting down jewelry.[31]

In contrast to peddlers and second-hand dealers, almost nothing is known about the work lives of Five Points' largest single occupational group: its menial day laborers. Construction work probably provided most of the employment for day laborers, who comprised four in every ten male Five Points workers. Menial laborers could dig foundations, carry heavy hods full of bricks and mortar to masons, and haul away work-related debris. Municipal projects employed many laborers, especially for the digging of sewer lines and the paving of streets with cobblestones. When outdoor work slowed a bit in midsummer, a laborer might find a job along the waterfront, loading or unloading sacks and crates from the hundreds of ships that arrived and departed each week. Laborers' work was often very dangerous; newspapers overflowed with reports of hod carriers falling from ladders, longshoremen crushed by falling cargo, and laborers buried by the collapsing walls of unfinished buildings.

As dangerous as a laborer's work might be, his greatest fear was probably not death but unemployment. On days too cold or wet to work, the laborer did not get paid, because "a storm stops his work and wages." Some might find steady employment at a single construction site; others had to look for a position each day. Sudden sickness or a job-related injury could also throw one out of work at any time. Employers would not hold a laborer's position for him while he recuperated. Even in perfect health, observed the *Tribune*, only "an energetic and lucky man . . . can make more than two hundred and fifty days' work as an out-door laborer in the course of a year, while the larger number will not average two hundred." During recessions, many laborers could not secure more than one or two days of paid work per week. Unemployment could wreak havoc on family

finances, because laborers had to fall back on summer savings to get by during the lean winter months. "A month's idleness, or a fortnight's sickness, and what misery!" observed an Irish journalist. Increasing the laborers' typical wage of a dollar a day would have helped, but given the vast numbers of impoverished laborers, they had little bargaining leverage. The Laborers' Union Benevolent Association concentrated its efforts on sickness and death benefits. In return for a two-dollar initiation fee and 12½ cents monthly dues, members in 1850 received two dollars per week when too sick to work and fifteen dollars for burial. The organization was not particularly popular, however, with no more than one in eight New York laborers joining. The laborer's life was one of the hardest, most dangerous, and most financially precarious in Five Points.[32]

One might imagine that the Irish would resent the extent to which they were forced to toil as laborers, but at least one Five Pointer found the Irish concentration in manual labor both natural and appropriate. "What a laughable sight it would be to see a German Jew or Dutchman mount a ladder with a hod of brick or mortar to a five- or six-story house," wrote Michael Coogan of Mulberry Street to the editor of the *Irish-American* in 1853. "No, they follow pursuits more congenial to their taste and capacity. One takes to his bag, basket and crook, rag-picking and bone-gathering; the other to glazing, peddling, and swopping old clothes." Given what they had been paid in Ireland, argued Coogan, Irish Americans should be happy to work as laborers in New York.

Finding themselves frequently unemployed, Irish-born laborers in New York responded as they often had in Ireland—they tramped into the countryside looking for work. Just as Lansdowne's poor tenants had walked hundreds of miles in search of employment in the autumn and early winter, New York's laborers sometimes ventured to the South during slow winter months hoping to find construction work there. Others went to upstate New York or even the Midwest looking for canal or railroad jobs. These workers suffered great hardships living in labor camps, and the families they left behind in Five Points endured equally severe burdens. Often, money left to support the family ran out before the worker returned. On Mulberry Street in an attic garret, a charity worker found a woman whose "husband had gone to the country in search of work, six months before, since which time she had heard nothing from him. How she had managed to live, we could not imagine. . . . There were four children, one an infant

at the breast," all dressed "in rags." They would have starved but for meals provided by the Five Points House of Industry. A "Mrs. B." on Mulberry Street had a fifteen-month-old and a newborn baby. Her unemployed husband had left six months earlier looking for work outside New York, but she had heard nothing from him since and the money he left had run out, leaving her totally destitute. A Five Pointer whose sailor husband had not been heard from in nearly a year likewise appeared at the door of the Five Points Mission one day with three children who were "nearly naked. . . . To pay her rent, she had sold and pawned her furniture till nearly every article was gone; to get bread she had parted with her clothing and her children's clothing, till they were altogether in the deepest distress." Some of these missing men had undoubtedly died of disease or work-related injuries. Margaret Connor, for example, was left with a two-year-old son to care for when her husband drowned in 1855 while working for the Erie Railroad. But others had simply abandoned their families.[33]

"THE MOST APPALLING SCENES OF DESTITUTION"

Abandoned women had to find work to support their families; many became seamstresses. "There are none who are more poorly paid for their work, or who suffer more privation and hardship" than seamstresses, wrote a *New York Herald* reporter in 1853. In order to document his assertion, the journalist went to Five Points, where he ventured into a decrepit rear tenement on Mulberry Street to interview a shirt sewer, the lowest-paid type of needleworker. The mistress of the house, a widow, had supported herself and her children this way for seven years. She earned four cents per shirt, she explained to the reporter, and "some days, by working from seven in the morning till twelve at night, I have made five shirts." Working at that furious pace, the most she had ever earned in a week was a dollar.

One could not support a family on such a pittance. This seamstress supplemented her income by renting most of her tiny two-room apartment to three boarders, who paid $4 of her $4.50 rent. Her nineteen-year-old daughter had recently moved out to work as a domestic servant, and some of her salary helped support her mother and younger siblings. Sometimes, this seamstress got "washing and scrubbing to do, and then I make more than I could at the shirts." She was also lucky to have a relatively generous

employer. Although many garment industry contractors were renowned for their heartlessness, her employer was "very good to me, and when I am in want of a dollar [he] always advances it to me."

Even after supplementing her income by these various means, the seamstress and her children led a very difficult life. Of the few possessions in her spare apartment—"four chairs, a rickety table, a looking glass, some cups, saucers, plates, a pot and a kettle, [and] a few other kitchen utensils"—many belonged to the lodgers. They could not afford beds, so they slept on the floor. Sometimes, all she could afford to feed her family was bread and molasses, though "on Sundays we generally get a piece of meat, and live more comfortably than on any other day."

About half the women in Five Points who did paid work had jobs in the garment trades. Not all seamstresses were as impoverished as this Mulberry Street shirt sewer, but such conditions were not uncommon. In the 1850s, in fact, what the *Tribune* called "the wretchedness of needlewomen" became something of a *cause célèbre* in New York. Newspaper exposés documented their pathetic lives, reformers held meetings to organize relief for them, and charitable organizations chronicled their struggles to support themselves and their families. Some female garment workers toiled merely to supplement the incomes of husbands, fathers, or brothers. But the hundreds who had no choice but to support either themselves or whole families with the needle, said the *Times*, inevitably led lives of "misery, degradation, and wretchedness."[34]

Some seamstresses in Five Points labored in workshops run either by clothing retailers or their suppliers. The needleworkers who received the most notoriety, however, were those who labored at home. Widows with children to care for and those supporting sick siblings or infirm parents usually sewed in their tenements. Widow Mary Ann Dwyre of 52 Mulberry Street, for example, turned to the needle to support herself and daughter Charlotte when her husband Laurence Muldoon passed away. A childless Lansdowne immigrant, Mary Sullivan, likewise sustained herself as a seamstress in New York after the death of her husband, Ned.[35]

Not all Five Points seamstresses were widows. Mary Twomey, also a Lansdowne immigrant, did needlework to supplement the income of her peddler husband, Cornelius. Others were single women who needed to earn money but did not want to become domestic servants, who were constantly on duty and worked virtually every day of the year. In contrast, noted the

Tribune, a seamstress "enjoys considerable personal independence as to hours, locations, &c." Others took to needlework because, having once lived in better circumstances, "they cannot bring themselves quite down to kitchen-work in the basements of those who . . . were yesterday their equals . . . so they shrink into a garret and stitch, stitch, until they wear out or starve out and are taken to the hospital, the poor-house or the grave."[36]

One of the factors that drove seamstresses to the grave was the way they were paid. Not only did they earn mere pennies for their labor, but they usually had to post a one-dollar deposit with their employer to get work at all. One "can have no idea of the sacrifices, hardships and humiliations to be passed through before sufficient means can be raised to enable them to make the necessary deposit," stated the *Tribune*. Some employers used the threat of confiscating the deposit to keep their workforce docile. Despite promising five cents per shirt, they would criticize the quality of the sewing when the finished shirts were returned and pay only four cents, threatening to keep the deposit if the needlewoman complained. Or the employer might return the deposit but refuse to pay for the work, claiming the shirts had been ruined. "No serf in the middle ages," concluded the *Tribune*, "was ever more helplessly under the absolute control of his superior lord as are the needle women to the employers."[37]

Some seamstresses fought back. When shirt manufacturer John Davis of 48 William Street would neither pay two seamstresses for their work nor return their deposit, they sued him. The court ordered Davis to pay the workers the promised six cents per shirt, return their deposits, and reimburse the seamstresses for time lost in pursuing the lawsuit. Still, many employers continued to cheat their workers. Five years later, Davis again found himself in court, sued by another group of seamstresses for the same offense. One can only imagine how many defenseless women Davis had managed to cheat in the intervening years. Another seamstress asked her employer for work that paid better than shirts and was given pillowcases, but failed to ask exactly how much she would earn. When she returned a day later with the finished cases and received only fifteen cents, she told the *Herald* in 1853, "my heart was nearly ready to break."[38]

Sensing their virtual helplessness at the hands of unscrupulous employers, a group of needlewomen and reformers in March 1851 organized the Shirt-Sewers' Association of the City of New-York. Its primary function was to establish a "Shirt Depot" at 9 Henry Street (just east of the Five Points neighborhood) so that "mechanics and others" could order shirts directly from the sewers, thus putting the seamstresses "beyond the caprice of employers" and directing all profits to the needlewomen. The organization seemed at first to hold some promise of success. *Tribune* publisher Horace Greeley and Rev. Henry Ward Beecher endorsed it, and by the end of its first year the association employed as many as one hundred seamstresses. But their made-to-order work apparently could not compete with the convenience of choosing a ready-made shirt from a merchant's stock. By June 1853, only forty or fifty needlewomen worked at the association's shop. The overwhelming majority of seamstresses continued to labor under the grueling conditions that would characterize the needle trades into the twentieth century.[39]

As in other occupations, a seamstress's work life had seasonal swings. According to the *Tribune*, winter was the worst time for seamstresses because they had less work to do but had to pay more in fuel and lighting expenses. Yet summer was hardly better. The *Tribune* referred to late summer as "'the hurrying season'" because garment wholesalers rushed to complete orders for the retailers, who sold large quantities of clothing as the weather turned colder. A seamstress could count on plenty of work at this point, and perhaps even a penny or two more per shirt. But the stress was overwhelming, as each needleworker strained her eyes and muscles to complete as many shirts as possible in order to squirrel away funds for the winter. It was during these late summer months that the life of the seamstress most resembled that of the fictional needlewoman in the English poet Thomas Hood's "Song of the Shirt":

> . . . Work, work, work,
> Till the brain begins to swim,
> And work, work, work,
> Till the eyes are heavy and dim.
> Seam and gusset and band,
> Band and gusset and seam,
> Till o'er the buttons I fall asleep
> And sew them on in my dream.[40]

Many Five Points seamstresses who lived with brothers, parents, or husbands did not have to work this hard. They sewed to supplement the

family income, not to support an entire household. But the suffering of those who had no other means of support cannot be exaggerated.[41]

While half the employed women in antebellum Five Points worked in the needle trades, another quarter toiled as domestic servants. Most domestics lived in the neighborhood with their employers, but one-third commuted to work. The proportion of Five Points women who would eventually work as domestics was probably much higher than the 25 percent indicated in the census, as many daughters would leave the neighborhood to take live-in positions as domestics when they turned nineteen or twenty. Significant numbers of Five Points housewives also may have worked as domestic servants before finding their mates.

In a material sense, the live-in domestic servant lived far better than the seamstress. Some were "thrust into noxious dark bed-rooms or unventilated garrets and lofts," but even these were far better than the typical Five Points "sleeping closet." Domestics also ate well and lived in safer, cleaner neighborhoods than other immigrants. Although their pay was as low as that of a seamstress ($4 to $8 per month depending on experience), they received free room and board, and could therefore either send virtually all their income to relatives back in Ireland or place it in a savings account. Margaret Naylan, a County Cork native who had emigrated to America in 1848, managed in seventeen years of work as a domestic to save nearly $500, the equivalent of about $7,000 today.[42]

Yet there was a heavy psychological toll involved. "The relationship between the servant girl and her employer, is nearly the same as that of master and slave," wrote a southerner commenting on life in New York. "The duties expected and exacted are precisely the same. The respect, and obedience, and humility required, are also nearly the same." Unlike slaves, however, employers felt no obligation to care for a sick servant and might simply fire her. Servants also had very little free time. The typical servant got every other Sunday off, alternating with the cook, chambermaid, or laundress, "so that the house shall never be 'left alone.'" This meant little if any social life, making the young Irishwoman's already difficult task of finding a mate even more worrisome.[43]

Observers constantly praised the "Irish servant girl" for her propensity to send her meager salary to loved ones back in Ireland. "The great ambition of the Irish girl is to send 'something' to her people as soon as possible after she has landed in America," observed a visiting Irish journalist, John

Francis Maguire, in 1868. ". . . Loving a bit of finery dearly," he continued, "she will resolutely shut her eyes to the attractions of some enticing article of dress, to prove to the loved ones at home that she has not forgotten them; and she will risk the danger of insufficient clothing, or boots not proof against rain or snow, rather than diminish the amount of the little hoard to which she is weekly adding, and which she intends as a delightful surprise to parents who possibly did not altogether approve of her hazardous enterprise. To send money to her people, she will deny herself innocent enjoyments, womanly indulgences, and the gratifications of legitimate vanity." Men scrimped and saved to send bank drafts to Ireland as well. Maguire noted that even hardened New York criminals who might spend much of the year in jail practiced self-denial around Christmas and Easter so they could send a remittance to their old father or mother in Ireland. But of the $120 million (according to Maguire's estimate) that Irish Americans had remitted to Ireland from 1845 to 1865, a large portion came from the purses of domestic servants.[44]

Some servants found it difficult to be surrounded by all that wealth and material comfort while their families suffered back in Ireland or Five Points. In 1859, for example, thirty-two-year-old Irish immigrant Ann Kelly of 54 Mulberry Street was accused by her employer of theft. Asked by the District Attorney's Office what had happened, the servant replied that "I got drunk, and went into the lady's wardrobe and helped myself pretty freely." For those who could resist such temptations, however, work as a domestic servant offered poor Irish immigrants the chance to wield more leverage with their employers than most Five Points workers. "Whenever one thinks she is imposed upon, the invariable plan is to threaten to leave the situation at once," noted the *Tribune*, "instead, as in other kinds of employment, of being fearful of losing it." This could translate, especially for an experienced servant, into better pay, more time off, and other benefits.[45]

In other parts of New York, young women found work in fields such as paper box making, type founding, book folding and binding, and umbrella and artificial-flower making. But virtually no Five Points women secured jobs in these better-paying occupations in the 1850s. These employers instead hired native-born women, mostly the young daughters of artisans and mechanics seeking to earn some money before marriage. Those who did hire immigrants, such as milliners, primarily employed English and French natives. By the 1890s, poor immigrant women would dominate

most of these trades, in part because natives abandoned such work but also because employers sought a cheaper workforce. Until then, these lucrative trades would remain virtually off-limits to Five Pointers.[46]

Even in the sphere of domestic service, the Irish faced significant prejudice and discrimination. An 1853 advertisement in the *New York Sun* read: "WOMAN WANTED—To do general housework; she must be clean, neat, and industrious, and above all good tempered and willing. English, Scotch, Welsh, German, or any country or color will answer except Irish." A notice in the *Herald* two days later likewise specified "any country or color except Irish." The *Irish-American*—organ of the Irish community in New York—condemned such prejudice, vowing to "kill this anti-Irish-servant-maid crusade" and hiring a lawyer to sue the advertisers and newspapers involved. Although the *Irish-American*'s crusade did halt the appearance of specifically anti-Irish advertisements, employers simply modified their wording slightly. About one in ten continued to specify "Protestants" or "Americans" (though ads seeking male employees were remarkably free of such overt discrimination). While the *Irish-American* might boast by 1857 that "no Irish need apply" stipulations had virtually disappeared, thinly veiled prejudice against hiring Irish Catholics, especially as domestic servants, continued to be a staple of New York life.[47]

One way to escape such discrimination was to run one's own business. Five Points women usually got this opportunity only by taking over an enterprise after a spouse died. Twenty-nine-year-old Bridget Johnston, for instance, who had immigrated to New York from County Galway in 1840, operated a boardinghouse and liquor store at 8 Elizabeth Street after her husband disappeared. Forty-five-year-old widow Bridget Giblin, who had emigrated from Ireland in 1841, began to run the family's liquor store after her husband passed away. Grocer Ann McGowan at 55 Park Street, junk dealer Mary Hynes next door at 57 Park, and second-hand dealer Jane Wilson at 68 Baxter also seem to have been widows who took over family enterprises. Women who owned their own businesses sometimes earned relatively sizable incomes. Johnston, for example, had saved nearly $300 in her bank account by 1853, equivalent to about $5,000 today. If they chose to remarry, widows were expected to put family first. Eleanor Quinn, an old-clothes dealer on Baxter Street, told a neighborhood policeman that she planned to "get married and give up the business."[48]

Because few Five Pointers of either sex ever managed to start a business, very few women of an entrepreneurial bent got the opportunity to run one. A more typical pursuit for these women was to peddle fruit. The "Irish apple woman," with her pipe in her mouth and a small pile of fruit balanced on a folding table, was an omnipresent sight on the sidewalks of New York in the Civil War era. These peddlers sold whatever fruit was in season, but because apples could be kept without spoiling for many months and made a convenient snack for pedestrians, they were the favorite. Widows often sold apples to support themselves after their spouses died. Catherine Norris of 32 Baxter Street and Catherine McCall of 64 Mulberry both worked as fruit peddlers after their husbands passed away. Some married women peddled fruit if their children were old enough to be left alone. County Limerick native Johanna Baggott of 15 Mulberry Street, for example, became a "fruiterer" when her son Edward turned fourteen and began learning to manufacture walking canes. Working on the streets was not easy, but the flexible hours and independence fruit peddlers enjoyed must have often inspired envy in Five Points' hundreds of seamstresses and servants.[49]

"THEY . . . HAVE THEIR OWN LAWS AND CUSTOMS"

American society frowned upon street work by women, especially young women who might attract the attention of male passersby. Children, however, could work on the streets without breaking any sexual taboos. Consequently, hundreds of Five Points children plied "street trades" in order to supplement their families' incomes, or, in the cases of orphans, to support themselves. One of the best known street trades for girls was selling freshly cooked ears of sweet corn. "'Here's your nice Hot Corn, smoking hot, smoking hot, just from the pot!'" cried dozens of girls on the streets of New York when corn was in season. Attorney George Templeton Strong noted in 1854 that he "heard the cry [of the hot-corn girls] rising at every corner" on August and September nights and was often "lulled to sleep by its mournful cadence in the distance." Young corn vendors were so closely associated with impoverished New York neighborhoods that when *Tribune* reporter Solon Robinson published a collection of his essays on "life scenes" of poor young New Yorkers, he entitled it *Hot Corn*.[50]

The most heartrending tale in Robinson's book was that of a Five Points hot corn vendor known as "Little Katy." He described her as "an

emaciated little girl about twelve years old, whose dirty shawl was nearly the color of rusty iron, and whose face, hands, and feet, naturally white and delicate, were grimed with dirt until nearly of the same color." Asked why she stayed out so late selling corn, Katy replied that she was afraid to go home until she had sold it all because her alcoholic mother would beat her if she did not earn a certain sum each day. According to Katy, her mother used the money from her corn sales to buy rum. A few weeks after meeting Robinson in the autumn of 1853, Katy fell ill, supposedly from staying out too late in the chilly autumn air. Her ailment, wrote Robinson, was aggravated by a beating her mother gave her for not earning enough money. Soon after the thrashing, Little Katy died. Contributions to the Five Points House of Industry soared after publication of Robinson's story, as New Yorkers sought to support its efforts to take such children off the streets and away from abusive parents. Robinson's book sold 50,000 copies, more "than any since *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," according to Strong.[51]

Many of the young girls who sold corn in August and September became street sweepers during the winter. These children swept intersections so pedestrians could cross the street without dirtying their boots with mud. Given the filth of the New York streets and the quality of their brooms, a sweeper could do little to remove the muck from a street corner. Nonetheless, the tips they received in the rain and snow—when they did a "brisk business"—could be quite substantial. A street sweeper could earn a dollar a day, and twice that on a very busy and snowy Saturday, scurrying about at crowded intersections offering her services to the well-dressed passersby. But if the weather was good, a street sweeper might return home with twenty-five cents or less. Dozens of Five Points children supplemented their families' incomes by sweeping intersections in the winter months.[52]

Young girls were best known for selling corn and sweeping street corners; boys tended to work as bootblacks and newsboys. It was especially easy for Five Pointers to become newsboys because most of the city's newspapers were produced just south of the neighborhood at the southern end of the Sixth Ward. Newsboys, generally ten to thirteen years old, earned half a cent for every daily paper sold during the 1850s, paying 1½ cents for each two-cent journal. Some bought their papers directly from the publisher, but most purchased them from wholesalers, men in their late teens or early twenties who had once been newsboys themselves. Unsold

newspapers could not be returned for a refund, so it was vitally important not to buy too many and be stuck with unsold inventory. In order to estimate sales, a newsboy would scan the contents of the paper—if he could not read, he would ask a friend to do it for him—before choosing how many to purchase. He would scream out the headlines at the top of his lungs in order to attract the attention of pedestrians on busy streets such as Broadway. Often he tailored his appeal to each passerby, emphasizing business news for a strolling merchant and cultural reports for a potential female customer. Newsboys typically earned from twenty-five to fifty cents per day, though sixty cents to a dollar was not unheard-of for the best and most energetic salesmen. On a day when the paper featured news of an execution, revolution, or disaster, a newsboy might take home two or three dollars, and on a particularly brisk Sunday, even more. With these substantial sums at stake, newsboys organized to protect their interests. In 1850, New York ministers sought to preserve the dignity of the Sabbath by banning the boys "from crying and selling papers on Sunday." The newsboys responded with a protest meeting in City Hall Park and successfully fended off the proposed law.[53]

Like the street sweepers and hot corn girls, most of the city's newsboys took their earnings home to help support their families. But many newsboys were orphans or runaways who lived on the streets. Owen Kildare was seven years old when, in 1871, his stepfather kicked him out of their Catherine Street home. Kildare went to Park Row (where most of the city's newspapers had their offices), took up with a gang of newsboys who slept on the streets, and soon began selling newspapers himself. During the summer, these waifs slept in City Hall Park, on courthouse steps, or in coal boxes under building stairwells. In the winter, they huddled over steam grates outside the newspaper pressrooms or in the doorways of unlocked buildings.

Despite these hardships, the newsboys relished their freedom and independence. On a typical day, they bought their morning papers at the crack of dawn and worked until they had exhausted their supply, usually around nine o'clock. They would then eat breakfast at an inexpensive restaurant, and afterward go to a ferry terminal hoping to earn tips carrying passengers' packages to the hacks and omnibuses. After their midday dinner, newsboys purchased their supply of afternoon papers and sold them into the evening. Many then went to the working-class theaters on the Bowery

or Chatham Street, after which they could often be found at midnight in a "'coffee and cake' cellar" taking their supper, smoking a cigar, or sipping a cup of coffee. Although Children's Aid Society founder Charles Loring Brace started the Newsboys' Lodging House during the 1850s to take these children off the streets, hundreds chose to continue living on their own. Newsboys came from all over the city, but poverty drove an especially large number of Five Points boys to this vocation. One was Tim Sullivan, later the Tammany Hall boss "Big Tim" Sullivan. The son of Lansdowne immigrants Daniel Sullivan and Catherine Connelly, Tim was living at 25 Baxter Street when, at age seven, he began hawking newspapers to help support his family.[54]

The other trade most popular with Five Points boys was shoe shining, universally known in the Civil War era as "boot blacking." Many newsboys had once been bootblacks. Tim Sullivan, for example, had shined shoes at the Fourth Ward police station house before peddling newspapers. Bootblacks typically ranged in age from ten to sixteen, though some (like Sullivan) started work much younger. "The headquarters of this class are in or near the Five Points district," noted one reporter in 1868. "They form a regular confraternity, and have their own laws and customs." Like the newsboys, the bootblacks were well organized, operating an informal trade union. "The 'Order' establishes a fixed price for labor, and takes care to protect its members against the competition of irregular intruders. . . . The affairs of the society are managed by a 'Captain of the bootblacks,' whose word is supreme, and who wields his power as all arbitrary rulers do." Like street sweepers, bootblacks depended on bad weather to improve business, though the filth of Manhattan's thoroughfares kept their services in constant demand. Those with regular followings set up shop in certain high-traffic locations. Others, with small wooden foot stands slung over their shoulders, chased potential customers up and down the sidewalks of the busiest streets, lamenting the embarrassing appearance of a gentleman's footwear in an effort to win his business. Earning about the same amount as the newsboys, bootblacks who lived on their own were likewise renowned for their lavish spending on food, drink, tobacco, and entertainment. But those who lived at home would have turned most of their earnings over to their parents. Although most bootblacks were the sons of Irish immigrants, dozens of Five Points Italian boys were also working as bootblacks by the eve of the Civil War.[55]

For every child who worked full time as a bootblack or newsboy, there were five or ten who helped support their families in more informal ways. The most common was to scavenge for coal, looking for chunks of the shiny, black rocks on the street near coal yards or by the docks where it was unloaded from barges. Some children collected scrap wood, which could be burned in the family stove or sold for kindling. Still others prowled the streets looking for (or stealing) scrap metal, glass, or anything that could be sold to Five Points' many junk dealers.

Children could scavenge for fuel or scrap metal or glass while playing in streets, alleys, and yards. Yet as the Civil War approached, it seemed that increasing numbers of New York children devoted *all* their energy to work. Boys bought matches wholesale and sold them door to door. Girls peddled flowers on street corners in all but the winter months. In 1860, the Children's Aid Society found the increasing number of poor girls employed in factories especially alarming, noting that its inspectors regularly observed children making "hoop-skirts, artificial flowers, boxes, mantillas, caps, envelopes, and especially ready-made clothing." Adolescents had been almost unknown in these fields fifteen years earlier. Although cases in which children worked to support alcoholic parents garnered the most coverage in the press, the vast majority worked out of economic necessity. Children in Sixth Ward households headed by widows were three and a half times more likely to hold steady jobs than those in homes in which an adult male worked full time. Given Five Points' preponderance of widows, it is no wonder that so many youngsters there were forced to devote the bulk of their childhoods to street work.[56]

"HARD TIMES"

Many Five Points workers lived in precarious circumstances even in the best of economic times, and when the American economy took one of its periodic downturns, living conditions became especially bad. In November 1854, the press began to note "hard times" for city workers that far exceeded the usual seasonal slowdown. "This winter, unlike any of the fifteen preceding it, has seen thousands of able and generally industrious men and women reduced to distress and beggary by the sudden and wholesale failure of their accustomed work," commented the *Tribune*. Record numbers of journeymen found themselves discharged from factories and work-

shops, while "even clerks" lost their jobs because so many "mercantile establishments are closed or out of business." Thousands of laborers "hitherto employed in the vast building operations of our City, now almost wholly suspended," found themselves destitute. Even many of those most steadily and reliably employed of immigrant workers, the "servant girls," had been "thrown out of place by the collapsing fortunes or the vanishing of incomes."[57]

As a result, New Yorkers flocked to the city's soup kitchens in unprecedented numbers. Relief statistics confirm the extent of the suffering. The New York Association for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor, which dispensed food or fuel only to the most desperate paupers, aided nearly three times as many indigent New Yorkers in January 1855 as it had a year earlier. Many Five Pointers were among them. "The past year has been particularly marked by general pecuniary pressure, and excessive suffering among the poor," remarked the annual report of the Five Points Mission for 1855. "The wretchedness and degradation of this locality have been made *more manifest* than ever before. . . . [T]he multitude . . . seemed in many instances to be on the very verge of starvation." The mission distributed so much food in the winter of 1854–55 (providing foodstuffs to nine hundred families daily) that it teetered on the brink of bankruptcy by mid-February.[58]

Just three years later, the Panic of 1857 again threw thousands of Five Pointers out of work. "The past winter [1857–58] has been one of unparalleled suffering among the poor at the Five Points," reported charitable workers there. "Want of work has caused multitudes to ask for bread who never begged before." This depression seemed to have a particularly devastating impact on the needle trades. The *Herald* estimated that half the tailors, seamstresses and cutters were unemployed and that only one in ten wholesale clothing establishments was giving out work. "It was really afflicting yesterday and the day before to see the large number of poor working women who crowded many of the down town stores early in the morning, eagerly seeking for work, and each in turn pleading their and their families circumstances, and begging for some thing to do, even at half price, or on half or quarter time." Unable to save money due to their pitiful pay, the seamstresses were "in many instances already entirely destitute of the actual necessaries of life, although they, in some instances, have not been over a week or ten days out of employment." The Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor agreed that "there were probably none whose condition was more pitiable than that of the sewing women . . . who were suddenly deprived of work. . . . Their slavish labor and scanty compensation afforded them no reserved fund on which to fall back in time of need." Other Five Points workers found themselves in similarly desperate straits during the Panic of 1857.[59]

Such suffering must have sometimes made Five Pointers wonder if they would have been better off staying in Ireland. It *was* probably easier to ride out hard times (though not actual famines) in Ireland, where winters were warmer, fuel in the form of turf was often available for free, and one could grow one's own food. According to the *Irish-American*, "the 'hard times' and want of employment" actually drove some immigrants to return.[60]

"THIS IS THE BEST COUNTRY IN THE WORLD"

Still, return migration was exceedingly rare in the Civil War era, even though observers on both sides of the Atlantic debated whether reports of Irish success in America were exaggerated. One such debate took place on the Lansdowne estate. "The most cheering accounts are daily reaching us of their success in New York," claimed Lansdowne's estate agent in 1851, soon after the emigrants had left Kerry. "Every letter which arrives brings new accounts of how well they fare and urging others to come over if they can." A few years later, Trench reported that some of the emigrants had returned to Kerry sporting gold chains. Whether or not the Lansdowne emigrants wrote glowing accounts of their new homes cannot be verified, as none of their correspondence is known to have survived. Kenmare archdeacon John O'Sullivan later complained that Trench should have been "ashamed" at the way he exaggerated the successes of "the victims of your ill-advised extermination." Yet according to Trench, the emigrants claimed that they were "now living as well as Father McCarthy himself."[61]

The few surviving letters written by Palmerston's and Gore Booth's North Sligo emigrants indicate that they had few if any regrets about having moved to North America. "I can not say that I am sorry that I left home, except that my heart aches now and again, to see those faces which I loved and yet left them behind me," wrote one Gore Booth emigrant. "Tell Mary I still feel hurt at her leaving me to come alone, altho' I am very glad that I did come, for I do feel most happy and content here, so much so

that I sometimes forget Old Ireland for a time." Nineteen-year-old Eliza Quin, also a Gore Booth emigrant, wrote from the fringe of Five Points to her parents back in Ireland that "i am verry glad for leaving there and coming to this Country."[62]

These immigrants insisted that others should join them at their earliest opportunity. We "are fed everyday like on Christmas at home," boasted one Palmerston emigrant living with her employer near Toronto, "& the man and master are at one table—if a man is honest he is as well thought of as if he was worth thousands." Anyone willing to work hard could not only find employment but earn far more than in Ireland. Palmerston emigrant Pat McGowan wrote from New York that "I would advise [my brother] Mick McGowan to come out to this country & all the youngsters to come too if they are able. Let . . . them come as quick as possible."[63]

Not everyone was suited to life in America, warned the newcomers. McGowan recommended that those prone to drunkenness should stay behind. "Any person that does not think to mind himself let him stop at home for the whiskey is so cheap that it encourages the Irish fool to take it," he advised. He would have liked his friend "James Quin to come to this country but he would be too fond of the whiskey it is so cheap." Few of the immigrants regretted having left Ireland, and this was especially so for those who relocated to the United States. "This is the best Country in the world," exulted Quin, despite living in New York's most impoverished district. McGowan agreed that life in New York was far superior. Comparing his old life to his new one as he proudly sent his parents $20 (the equivalent of about $320 today) just months after arriving in New York, he could only wonder "how did we stand it so long a time?"[64]

Some observers nonetheless questioned the wisdom of emigrating, given that the Irish faced discrimination and were virtually forced into low-paying manual labor. Reading such charges in the *Irish-American*, Five Pointer Michael Coogan felt compelled to reply. Although it was true that Irish Americans worked primarily as laborers, he wrote, the Irish were especially well suited for the work. Besides, the County Wicklow native argued, manual labor paid well compared to the options available in Ireland. "*Don't they get good value for their time and labor,*" Coogan asked. "They can eat good beef, and pork, and butter, and eggs, and bread—not so at home in the old country," even though "an Irish laborer had to work harder there than here."[65]

Those familiar with the standard version of Irish-American history might be surprised by these letters. A deep pessimism pervades this literature, assuming that the famine immigrants were a kind of lost generation fated to be victims of disease, nativism, and overcrowded tenements in America.[66]

If any group of Five Pointers was going to fit this stereotype, it ought to be the Lansdowne immigrants. A full 90 percent of the Lansdowne men toiled as lowly paid menial laborers, and they lived with their families in the most filthy and overcrowded tenements. But account ledgers from the Emigrant Savings Bank suggest that these immigrants did far better than we have previously imagined. Lansdowne immigrants living in Five Points opened 153 accounts in the bank's first six years of operation (through August 1856). In fact, about half of the Lansdowne families living there had opened accounts by mid-1855. The bank records provide a rare glimpse into the economic fortunes of a very significant number of the Lansdowne immigrants.[67]

The bank ledgers suggest that even while living in Five Points, the Lansdowne immigrants were able to save far more than one might have imagined given their wretched surroundings and low-paying jobs. Take the case of the Tuosist natives who visited the bank together to open accounts on July 2, 1853. The first, Honora Shea, had been one of the earliest Lansdowne-assisted immigrants to arrive in New York, landing in March 1851 with her daughter Ellen Harrington, described by the bank secretary as "an illegitimate child, aged 14 yrs." Although Honora apparently could not depend on a male breadwinner for her support, and lived in the decrepit tenement at 35 Baxter Street, she was able to open her account with an initial deposit of $160, the equivalent of more than $2,500 today. The next account was assigned to laborer Patrick Murphy and his wife, Mary, who lived next door to Shea at 33½ Baxter and had also arrived in New York in March 1851. They made an initial deposit of $250, a sum worth roughly $4,000 in contemporary terms. Bank officials also gave an account to "washer" Barbara Sullivan, whose cramped apartment filled with her six children, son-in-law, and six boarders was described earlier. Sullivan, who at this point also lived at 33½ Baxter, made the smallest opening deposit of the three, $135 (roughly $2,200 today). Later in the day, a fourth Lansdowne immigrant, Judy O'Neill, also opened an account. O'Neill lived at 33½ Baxter as well and had arrived in New York in May

1851. She started her account with a deposit of $148 (about $2,400 today). These four Lansdowne immigrants, who had probably arrived in New York virtually penniless, had quickly managed to squirrel away substantial savings.[68]

Although the Lansdowne immigrants opened their accounts with an average deposit of $102, a significant sum, many of them started with just a few dollars and closed them a few weeks later, either because they needed the money or because they did not believe that their savings were safe. Only 51 percent of the Lansdowne immigrants ever managed to increase their initial balance by 50 percent or more. It appears that most Lansdowne immigrants saw the bank as a place to safely keep (and draw interest upon) nest eggs they had already managed to accumulate before opening their accounts. This would explain why so many Lansdowne immigrants did not add substantially to their initial deposits, even when they did keep their accounts open for extended periods. Bonane native Mary Flynn, for example, was in her early sixties when she opened an account in August 1853 with $45, though in less than a year she had doubled her money. During the recession winters of 1855 and 1858, she withdrew as much as half her savings, but always worked her way back to the $90 level within a year. That was the balance, give or take $5, at which her account remained into the late 1860s. Flynn undoubtedly saw $90 (about $1,500 today) as the appropriate size for her family's emergency fund.

Yet in 28 percent of the Lansdowne accounts, the immigrants accrued quite substantial financial resources—at least $250 ($4,000 in modern terms). Consider the three Tim Sheas. The first, along with his wife, Johanna, had accumulated $495 (more than $7,900 today) by 1860. A second Timothy and Johanna Shea, who arrived in New York in 1853, a year after their namesakes, had amassed $592 (roughly $9,500 in contemporary terms) by July 1857. A third Timothy Shea (sometimes called "O'Shea"), who had emigrated from Tuosist at age forty-eight in 1851, managed along with his wife Honora to save $658 (about $10,500 today) in three accounts by July 1857, the highest sum attained by any of the Lansdowne immigrants who had opened an account by mid-1856.[69]

One might argue that these Lansdowne immigrants were especially fortunate—that they must have found especially steady jobs and not had to deal with the financial crises caused by the death of a spouse or a long-term illness. But this does not seem to be the case either. Recall the story of

Lansdowne immigrant Ellen Holland. Her husband and eldest son both died, leaving Nelly a widow with two children to support. One might have expected her to dip into her savings to help make ends meet during such trying times, because she could not have earned much money as a "washer." But Nelly did no such thing. In fact, despite losing her family's two primary breadwinners, by 1860 she had increased her bank balance to $201.20 (more than $3,200 today), quite a feat for a widow who, just eight years earlier, had been on the brink of starvation. Nor were the Lansdowne immigrants more financially successful than other immigrants. Non-Lansdowne Five Pointers typically saved even more money.[70]

What accounts for this surprising financial success? Perhaps the privation these immigrants had experienced in County Kerry had conditioned them to practice extraordinary frugality. Living in Five Points they could pay among the lowest rents in New York, and taking in so many of their countrymen as lodgers enabled them to recoup a significant proportion of their housing expenses. Having so many of their kinsmen and former neighbors with them in New York also undoubtedly helped the immigrants. Virtually overnight, they created a large, intricate network that could be used to help find jobs, housing, even spouses. Their arrival in whole family units may have benefited the Lansdowners as well. Children could be set to work blacking boots or selling newspapers, while women could add to the family income by taking in boarders and laundry. And if someone through sickness, injury, or death became unable to work, there were plenty of relatives around to help out. There were also many Lansdowne immigrants who did not fare as well as the three Tim Sheas. For widows with young children, life was particularly hard. But the noticeable absence of Lansdowne surnames in the relief records of the Five Points Mission suggests that the Lansdowners took care of one another—helping widows find new mates and unemployed men and women new jobs.

It appears that once the Lansdowne immigrants got settled in Five Points and found work, they focused all their energies on saving money to establish nest eggs for their families, choosing to stay in Five Points even after they could afford to move to more spacious apartments in cleaner and safer neighborhoods. Inasmuch as many of them were undoubtedly also sending money to loved ones in Ireland, either to help support aged parents or to pay for relatives' emigration, the typical Lansdowne immigrant's ability to squirrel away $100 or more in just a few years is truly remarkable.

Some undoubtedly moved out of Five Points or to less squalid blocks within the neighborhood once they had established these competencies. But many, despite their substantial savings, decided to stay in the Lansdowne enclave, either because they enjoyed being surrounded by so many fellow Kerry natives or because they sought to continue saving as much money as possible by paying low rents. That so many of the Lansdowne immigrants' account balances remained relatively constant indicates that once they reached their savings goal, they began to raise their standard of living by spending more of their income. "If they do not get milk and honey in abundance," noted one Civil War–era immigrant, referring to the Irish, "they are able . . . to exchange . . . their 'male of potatoes' for plenty of good substantial food; their mud cabins and clay floors with fires on the hearth for clean, comfortable dwellings with warm stoves and 'bits of carpits on their flures.'"

Through a concerted scheme of hard work and self-sacrifice, then, the Lansdowne immigrants managed to improve their lives significantly, from both the misery of County Kerry and the initial privations of Five Points. So while natives may have considered Five Points "a hell-mouth of infamy and woe," most of the immigrants who arrived there from Ireland would have concurred with Quin's judgment that "this is the best Country in the world."[71]

5

PROLOGUE

"WE WILL DIRK EVERY MOTHER'S SON OF YOU!"

THE ELECTION DAY scene was typical of nineteenth-century New York. Hundreds of men thronged the street outside the polling place, dressed in long, rough overcoats and tall hats to ward off the November cold. Many were in a boisterous mood, having fortified themselves at neighborhood saloons for the anticipated rushing and shoving, fighting and brawling—what were popularly referred to as "election sports." At booths outside the polls, campaign workers handed out ballots and harangued the crowd with exhortations to vote for their candidates. Some in the crowd milled around these stands, harassing the speakers and arguing loudly with supporters of their political rivals. Others jostled their way into the line that wound from the ballot box far out into the street.

Suddenly a loud cry pierced the air, and all eyes turned to a "a lithe, dark, handsome man" standing atop a packing crate. *"I am Isaiah Rynders!"* he shouted, knowing that his name alone would strike fear into the hearts of many within earshot. "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! If you don't leave these polls in five minutes, *we will dirk every mother's son of you!*" New York voters, whether longtime residents or temporary Philadelphia transplants, knew that "Ike" Rynders did not make idle threats. Within five minutes, wrote an eyewitness, "five hundred men left the polls, . . . and went home without voting, for fear of assassination."[1]

This was just one episode in a life story that, as the *Times* noted without exaggeration years later, "forms one of the most romantic of histories." Born in 1804 near Albany to a German-American father and a Protestant Irish-American mother, Rynders earned his lifelong title of "Captain"