

PROLOGUE

"THIS PHENOMENON, 'JUBA'"

CHARLES DICKENS WAS NOT impressed by New York during his 1841 tour. He found the streets filthy, the buildings insubstantial and unimpressive, and his hosts coarse and unsophisticated. Dickens's published account of the trip, *American Notes*, overflows with sarcasm and condescension. But there was one part of his tour that Dickens loved: his visit to a Five Points dance hall.

Victorian Englishmen such as Dickens might sneer disdainfully at most American arts and letters, but they were fascinated by African-American culture. Dickens's introduction to black American dance took place on Orange Street at Almack's, one of the many black-run dance emporiums then operating in Five Points. He was enthralled from the moment he walked in and descended into the narrow, low-ceilinged basement dance room. "Heyday! the landlady of Almack's thrives!" Dickens declared, describing her as "a buxom fat mulatto woman, with sparkling eyes, whose head is daintily ornamented with a handkerchief of many colours."

Dickens initially found the dance exhibition staged by five or six black couples unimpressive. But then a teenager, described by Dickens as "the wit of the assembly, and the greatest dancer known," dashed onto the floor. "Instantly the fiddler grins, and goes at it tooth and nail; there is a new energy in the tambourine; new laughter in the dancers; new smiles in the landlady; new confidence in the landlord; new brightness in the very candles," wrote Dickens as he thrilled to the dancer's multitude of steps and dance styles. "Single shuffle, double shuffle, cut and cross-out, snapping his fingers, rolling his eyes, turning in his knees, presenting the backs of his legs in front, spinning about on his toes and heels like nothing but the man's fingers on the tambourine; dancing with two left legs, two right

legs, two wooden legs, two wire legs, two spring legs—all sorts of legs and no legs—what is this to him? And in what walk of life, or dance of life, does man ever get such stimulating applause as thunders about him, when, having danced his partner off her feet, and himself too, he finishes by leaping gloriously on the bar-counter and calling for something to drink . . . ?"¹

The sixteen-year-old who mesmerized Dickens that night was William Henry Lane, one of the most influential dancers of the nineteenth century. Despite his fame, only the barest outlines of Lane's biography are known. Born in Providence, Rhode Island, Lane apparently honed his dancing skills with tutelage from black jig-and-reel dancer Jim Lowe. Moving to Five Points, Lane became known professionally as "Master Juba," though whether this was a nickname chosen by African-American friends or a stage name dreamed up by a white promoter is unclear. As would become a tradition in African-American dance, Master Juba first demonstrated his prowess by imitating the best moves of his competitors before wowing audiences with his own innovations.

According to the *Herald*, crowds squeezed into "Pete Williams' place," as Almack's later became known, to see "this phenomenon, 'Juba,' imitate all the dancers of the day and their special steps. Then Bob Ellingham, the interlocutor and master of ceremonies, would say, 'Now, Master Juba, show your own jig.' Whereupon he would go through all his own steps and specialties, with never a resemblance in any of them to those he had just imitated." When Lane performed in London in 1848, the British also found his combination of speed and grace astounding. "How could he tie his legs into such knots," asked the *Illustrated London News*, "and fling them about so recklessly, or make his feet twinkle until you lose sight of them altogether in his energy?"²

Although the *Illustrated London News* insisted that Juba and his African-American counterparts were the only original dancers in the world, white working-class New Yorkers took pride in their own dance styles. Young Walt Whitman noted that when butchers in their market stalls "have nothing else to do, they amuse themselves with a jig, or a break down." Describing another style of dance popular with native-born whites, the author and critic Cornelius Mathews asserted that there was "more muscle expended in one shuffle than in a whole evening of [dance at] a fashionable party." Irish immigrants brought their own forms to Five Points, including reels, jigs, and doubles. This last step, wrote one visitor



Master Juba performing in London. *Illustrated London News* (August 5, 1848). Collection of the author.

to Ireland, "consists in striking the ground very rapidly with the heel and toe, or with the toes of each foot alternately. The perfection of this motion consists, besides its rapidity, in the fury in which it is performed." All these styles could be found on display in Five Points' famous dance halls.³

Just as boxing promoters purposely pitted Irish versus American or, in later years, white versus black boxers to increase interest in their bouts, theatrical agents organized dance contests between Juba and his "greatest white contemporary," Irish-American John Diamond. Born in New York

City in 1823, Diamond has been called "one of, if not the greatest jig dancers that the world ever knew." Competing near Five Points at both the Chatham and Bowery Theaters beginning in 1844, the contestants were each paid the enormous sum of \$500, indicating that such competitions must have attracted huge crowds. "No conception can be formed of the variety of beautiful and intricate steps exhibited by him with ease," stated one contest handbill advertising Master Juba's appearance. "You must see to believe." The "winner" of these competitions is not recorded. But we do know that such contests, as well as the friendly rivalries between native-born whites, Irish immigrants, and African Americans within Five Points' dance halls, had a profound influence on the direction of American dance. Each group incorporated favorite steps from their competitors' dance idioms into their own. In Juba's case, he adopted some of the high-stepping, foot-stomping style of the jig into his own footwork. It was from this interaction between African Americans dancing the shuffle and the Irish dancing the jig that "tap dancing" developed. Lane, the "most influential single performer of nineteenth-century American dance," was the key figure behind the emergence of tap. A dance historian reported in 1948 that "the repertoire of any current tap dancer contains elements which were established theatrically by him." The 1995 Broadway dance production *Bring in Da Noise, Bring in Da Funk* included an homage to Juba.⁴

The melting pot of dance found in Five Points contributed enormously to Master Juba's innovations. But like many of the neighborhood's residents, Juba left Five Points after becoming a star, joining an English dance troupe by 1848. Yet also like many Five Pointers, Juba did not live long enough to enjoy his success fully. Still in London, he died suddenly in 1852 at the age of twenty-seven.⁵

Play



GIVEN THAT FIVE POINTERS lived hard, worked hard, and fought hard political battles, it should come as no surprise that they played hard, too. They joined volunteer fire companies that often seemed more determined to battle each other than to fight fires. Their favorite sport was bare-knuckle boxing. They also loved the theater, but even their passion for drama led to rioting. They gambled late into the night. They danced with abandon, until all hours. Although elite New Yorkers might disdain Five Pointers, working-class New Yorkers came from all over the city to join in the neighborhood's rowdy, carefree style of fun.

"THE CHEAPSIDE OF NEW-YORK; THE PLACE OF THE PEOPLE"

Residents or visitors in search of a good time might find entertainment on virtually any block in Five Points. But the neighborhood street most associated with amusement—for Five Pointers and all working-class New Yorkers—was the Bowery. The Bowery began at the eastern edge of Five Points at Chatham Square and continued northward for several miles. Cornelius Mathews called the Bowery "the greatest street on the Continent, the most characteristic, the most American, the most peculiar." Walt Whitman loved the Bowery because it presented "the most heterogeneous melange of any street in the city: stores of all kinds and people of all kinds are to be met with every forty rods." In contrast to Broadway, with its fashionable shops and well-heeled merchants, the Bowery was "the Cheapside

of New-York; the place of the People; the resort of mechanics and the laboring classes; the home and the haunt of a great social democracy. . . . You may be the President, or a Major-General, or be Governor, or be Mayor, and you will be jostled and crowded off the sidewalk just the same." The variety of shops and amusements prompted one writer to call the Bowery "a city in itself," while a South Carolinian marveled that it "looks like a vast holiday fair two miles long."⁶

A number of features contributed to the carnival atmosphere. Bowery merchants were among the first to use brightly lit signs and displays to attract customers. In addition, most of the best known Bowery businesses in the Five Points vicinity were raucous bars. Two cavernous beer halls, the Atlantic Garden and the Volks Garden, faced each other between Bayard and Canal Streets. The Atlantic (on the Five Points side of the street) was the better known of the two, sporting several bars, a shooting gallery, billiard tables, bowling alleys, and an orchestra. Octogenarian Charles Haswell remembered its "dense clouds of tobacco-smoke, and hurry of waiters, and banging of glasses, and calling for beer." A few doors south of the Atlantic Gardens—at the southwest corner of Bayard and Bowery—was Paddy Worden's saloon, the Worden House. People came from miles around to see the carved black walnut ceiling in its bar, though it attracted its regular customers primarily from the East Side's "old sports," fighters and gamblers. Across the street at the northwest corner of Bowery and Bayard stood the North American Hotel, which housed another popular bar and hosted many Five Points political gatherings.⁷

Even if one had neither the money nor the inclination to patronize one of lower Bowery's famous watering holes, there was plenty to see, do, and buy out on the sidewalks. Street vendors thronged the boulevard, peddling oysters, hot yams (generally sold by African Americans), freshly roasted peanuts, hot corn in season, and sweet baked pears that one lifted by the stems out of syrup-filled pans. "Coffee and cake saloons" beckoned those seeking a respite from the throng or some warmth in colder weather.⁸

Other street activities could be found off the Bowery, especially around Paradise Square at the Five Points intersection. "Punch and Judy" shows (said to be the first ever performed in the United States), street singers, and an Englishman who swallowed swords "clean up to their hilts" could all be found on the sidewalks in the 1830s and '40s. Tumblers and jugglers would also appear, recalled Florry Kernan, "and throw somersaults, spin plates

and eat live coals of fire, and afterward spin a hundred yards of ribbon from their mouths." Musicians were everywhere, including bagpipe players in kilts and a "dark-skinned Savonyard, with organ and monkey, who would grind out 'Moll Brooks,' a Dutch waltz, and the 'Fisher's Hornpipe'" while his monkey in red coat and hat collected money.⁹

By the late 1840s and 1850s, however, the Bowery had overtaken Paradise Square as the most popular Five Points location for fun and entertainment. Working-class New Yorkers from all over the city went there. Young men with their dates, as well as large, single-sex groups of journeymen and shop girls, cruised up and down the famous street simply to see and be seen.

Many of these young men were known as "Bowery B'hoys," members of one of the most colorful subcultures in the city's history. The precise origin of the "Bowery B'hoy" is unclear. Americans had used the term "b'hoy" as early as 1834 to describe a working-class fellow who loved fun, adventure, hard drinking, and a night out with his pals (Bowery regulars pronounced the term "buh-hoy," prompting the unusual spelling). But by the 1840s, the New York b'hoys, especially those who hung out on the Bowery, had developed a unique style of their own. The Bowery B'hoy dressed to be noticed. He wore a

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

The Bowery B'hoy was not a dandy, however. The "heavy boots," for example, were not worn for the sake of fashion but "for service in slaughterhouses and at fires." Yet the Bowery B'hoy did want to dress well and look sharp.¹⁰



"The Soap-Locks" by Nicholas Calyo gives some sense of the appearance of Bowery B'hoys dressed up for a night on the town. The posters advertise the typical amusements they favored. It is not clear what the "People's albaiss" pouring from the can at the bottom right refers to. Collection of the New-York Historical Society.

The Bowery B'hoy's attitude was just as important as his wardrobe. According to George G. Foster, who studied him closely, "the governing sentiment, pride and passion of the B'hoy is independence—that he can do as he pleases and is able, under all circumstances, to take care of himself. He abhors dependence, obligation." The B'hoy's "thorough dislike of . . . aristocracy" drove him to be something of a political radical, as Foster found him typically "on intimate terms with men like [Mike] Walsh and [William] Leggett," radical Democrats who sought to abolish the perks of privilege in the city's political and economic life. Despite this love of autonomy and independence, the Bowery B'hoy did not shirk his commitments to friends and family. He prided himself on "his constancy and faithfulness to his domestic duties and responsibilities—his open abhorrence of all 'nonsense'—the hearty manner in which he stands up on all occasions for his friend, and especially his indomitable devotion to fair play." The Bowery B'hoys' love of adventure even extended to the martial realm, with Foster noting that "many of the coolest as well as most daring

acts of courage during the late Mexican war were performed by these men." Bowery B'hoys were also among the first New Yorkers to leave for California when the gold rush began. Yet while the B'hoy might live anywhere in New York, and travel far and wide in search of adventure and glory, he felt most at home on the Bowery.¹¹

The Bowery B'hoy's feats of bravery and glory were often inspired by a desire to impress his "G'hal." According to Foster, "the g'hal is as independent in her tastes and habits as [the B'hoy] himself. Her very walk has a swing of mischief and defiance in it, and the tones of her voice are loud, hearty and free." Like her male counterpart, the G'hal dressed flamboyantly in brightly colored clothing which one New Yorker remembered as "a cheap but always greatly exaggerated copy of the prevailing Broadway mode; her skirt was shorter and fuller; her bodice longer and lower; her hat more flaring and more gaudily trimmed; her handkerchief more ample and more flauntingly carried; her corkscrew curls thinner, longer, and stiffer, but her gait and swing were studied imitations of her lord and master, and she tripped by the side of her beau ideal with an air which plainly said, 'I know no fear and ask no favor.'" ¹²

Although it may be easy to reconstruct the appearance of the Bowery B'hoy and G'hal, determining exactly which New Yorkers were attracted to this subculture is much more difficult. "Who are the b'hoys and g'hals of New York?" asked Foster in 1850. "The answer to this question, if it could be completely efficient, would be one of the most interesting essays on human nature ever written." According to Cornelius Mathews, the B'hoy was "sometimes a stout clerk in a jobbing-house, oftener a junior partner in a wholesale grocery, and still more frequently a respectable young butcher with big arms and broad shoulders, in a blue coat, with a silk hat with a crape wound about its base, and who is known familiarly as a 'Bowery Boy!'" Charles Haswell agreed that the "Bowery Boy . . . was not an idler and corner lounge, but mostly an apprentice, generally to a butcher." The G'hal tended to work "in the press-room, the cap-sewing or the book-folding establishment."¹³

These trades were dominated by native-born workers. That the Bowery B'hoys were primarily American-born is confirmed by the only statement we have from a self-described B'hoy. Recalling the Astor Place Riot of 1849, John Ripley remembered years later that "I was at that time what

was known as a 'Bowery Boy,' a distinct 'gang' from either the 'know-nothing' or 'Native American' parties. The gang had no regular organization, but were a crowd of young men of different nationalities, mostly American born, who were always ready for excitement, generally of an innocent nature." Ripley implies that although the Bowery B'hoys were not nativists per se, patriotic chauvinism was part of their persona. Given that at least some were Irish immigrants, Ripley's more nuanced account of the Bowery B'hoy subculture rings truer than Alvin Harlow's assertion in *Old Bowery Days* that "the Bowery Boy gang was . . . anti-Irish, anti-Catholic, anti-British, anti-anything that was exotic or unfamiliar."¹⁴

Nonetheless, this subculture does appear to have appealed primarily to the native-born. Playwright Benjamin Baker gave his wildly popular B'hoy and G'hal characters the names "Mose" and "Lize" (short for Moses and Eliza), names one could never mistake for Irish Catholic. Inasmuch as 90 percent of adult Five Pointers were foreign-born by 1855, not many could have perceived themselves as B'hoys or G'hals. But many Five Pointers of the previous generation probably did see themselves in that mold before they moved out of the district. Frank Chanfrau, who portrayed Mose so convincingly that the B'hoys would accept no other actor in the role, was a former ship carpenter born in Five Points at the corner of the Bowery and Pell Street. It was also said that he and Baker based "Mose" in part on a grocer, Moses Humphrey, who lived on Mulberry Street from about 1827 to 1842. So while the Bowery B'hoy subculture probably had relatively few followers in Five Points by the time it became well known in the early 1850s, the neighborhood did contribute significantly to its formation.¹⁵

The Bowery B'hoy was a relatively fleeting phenomenon—recognized only in the late 1840s and virtually extinct by the Civil War (though Hollywood created its own 1940s version with such films as *Pride of the Bowery*, *Bowery Blitzkrieg*, and *Bowery Battalion*). But a second subculture with adherents in Five Points—that of the "sporting men"—flourished into the early twentieth century. Sporting men spent most of their time gambling, drinking, and fighting in saloons that catered to their ilk. Whereas Bowery B'hoys held regular jobs, consistent employment was anathema to the self-respecting sporting man. Isaiah Rynders, as we have seen, earned a living at various times through gambling, training racehorses, and intimidating voters. But most sporting men did not achieve

Rynders's fame or political status. More typical was Owen Kildare, who supported himself by working occasionally as a bouncer, fighting a sparring match, or teaching uptown dandies how to box. Although forgotten today, the "old sports" of New York formed a subculture as colorful and well known as that of the Bowery B'hoy.¹⁶

The most famous of the sporting men's hangouts were located just south of Five Points on Park Row facing City Hall Park. The best known of these was the Arena, at 28 Park Row, a saloon in which Rynders eventually bought an interest. But many of the sporting men's haunts, especially before 1850, were located in Five Points. Two of these, "Boss Thompson's" and "Vultee's old corner," faced each other on the west side of Chatham Street at the corner of Orange. In addition, "Big Jerry Tappen" had a place on Pearl near Elm, where, according to the *New York Clipper*, a sporting men's newspaper, "considerable sport could be obtained if necessary, in the way of muscular development. It was here that Country McClusky and Dave Scanlon had one of the hardest rough-and-tumble muddy fights that was ever seen. There was also a place on the Collect, or Five Points, kept by one Pete Rice, where many of the best sporting men assembled to participate with 'pasteboard'" (playing cards). Kernan, himself an old sport, recalled years later in the sporting man's patois that among the "good fighters who hailed from this locality" in its early days was "Eleck Fannin, at one time quite notorious to the city as a buffer. Joe Moon was some in his day, so was Siege Spears and Big-head Mat."¹⁷

Although we know that sporting men drank, fought, and gambled in Five Points, the extent to which they lived there is not clear. In a list of 275 or so "Old Sports of New York" published by the *Clipper* in 1860, there is a dearth of Irish surnames, leaving the impression that the "sporting" subculture, like that of the Bowery B'hoys, primarily attracted the native-born. Nonetheless, we know that some Irish Americans linked to the Five Points, such as Yankee Sullivan, James E. Kerrigan, and (much later) Owen Kildare, were perceived as sporting men. In general, sporting men were far less concerned about ethnicity than the Bowery B'hoys. The ultrapatriotism that characterized the Bowery B'hoy did not seem to motivate the sporting man, who above all prized one's ability to fight, drink, and avoid regular employment. Sporting men loved a good time, and as Kernan noted, "all jovial, free, generous stripes of mankind would have their frolic[s] and speers at the Points in preference to any other place."¹⁸

"THE SPORTING FIREMAN IS IN A CERTAIN
CIRCLE A MAN OF CONSIDERATION"

While the prominence of sporting men and Bowery B'hoys in Five Points may have declined as Irish immigrants came to dominate the neighborhood, the favorite pastime of both groups—service in volunteer fire companies—remained a staple of life. Firemen were the heroes of most lower-income New York neighborhoods. Young boys idolized and imitated local firefighters, while women swooned at their gallantry. "Roman gladiators and the Olympian games are brought to our mind," wrote the young Walt Whitman after seeing firemen race by pulling their pumping "machines." Although only volunteers, they took their responsibilities very seriously. Irish immigrant Matthew Breen recalled that "a fireman would sleep with his bedroom window partly open," no matter what the weather, in order to hear a summons to duty. When a nocturnal alarm did sound, the fireman could be found "rushing from his bed at midnight, snatching at his clothes, tumbling down stairs, and in a half distracted condition pulling foot for the engine-house, tearing open its door, hustling out the machine, and seizing the rope, hurrying away at the rate of ten miles an hour, shouting himself hoarse by the way, 'Fire—F-i-r-e—Fire! Fire! Fire!'—throwing himself like a salamander into the very thickest of the raging element—and in a couple of hours walking home to bed, sweating like a porpoise." In crowded tenements full of lamps and candles, fires were common and disastrous.¹⁹

In the antebellum years, only one fire company—Hope Hose Company No. 50 at 10½ Mott Street—was consistently located in the neighborhood. Others came and went. But Five Pointers did join nearby units, especially Fulton Engine Company No. 21 and Brennan Hose Company No. 60, located in 1858 just west of Five Points on Worth and Elm Streets respectively.²⁰

Curiously, not a single laborer, tailor, or shoemaker (the three most followed occupations in Five Points) belonged to one of the neighborhood's fire companies in 1858 when the city published a thorough survey of the department's membership. The Five Pointers in Hope Hose Company No. 50 instead included a hatter, a saw maker, a baker, a fruit dealer, a carpenter, a picture-frame maker, a silversmith, a gas fitter, and two merchants. Why poorer Five Pointers did not join fire companies is unclear. The fire com-

panies may have levied dues on members that precluded its less prosperous inhabitants from becoming members, or firemen may have required the job security to allow them to leave work on a minute's notice to fight a blaze.²¹

If so, these firemen need not have been financially secure for very long. Hope Hose Company's two "merchants," James Tucker and Edward Henry, had only recently achieved their relatively elevated occupational rank. Henry, a County Sligo native, had immigrated to New York in 1850. By 1852, the bachelor worked as a sailor and lived in a boardinghouse in the large brick tenement at 472 Pearl Street. Henry was a very disciplined saver, and by 1855, at twenty-seven, he had clawed his way up the economic ladder to become a clerk. He soon thereafter became a rag dealer, and by early 1857 had amassed savings of \$511 (equivalent to more than \$8,000 today). Like Henry, fireman Tucker had emigrated from County Sligo. Having arrived in New York in 1846 at age fourteen, he had undoubtedly worked in an unskilled capacity in his first years in New York. By 1855, when he lived in the heart of the Five Points Sligo enclave at 64 Mulberry Street, the twenty-three-year-old had snared one of the highly prized places on the city's police force. Work as a policeman offered high pay (\$12 per week at that point) without seasonal layoffs. Tucker used the money he was able to save while working as a policeman to become a "paper dealer" after he left the force in 1857.²²

Despite their relative prosperity, firemen were known as brawlers. In fact, it seemed at times that firemen had more to fear from their fellow firefighters than from the burning buildings they routinely entered. Firemen from different companies regularly clashed on the way to a blaze or at the hydrant nearest to it, because whichever unit reached the fireplug first had the right to pump its water. "A stranger upon witnessing the exciting races and savage howling of contending brigades . . . would immediately conclude that the town was at the mercy of an infuriated mob," commented an English immigrant. But competing companies sometimes fought even without the impetus of a dispute over a hydrant, or even of a fire. Five Points policeman William Bell recorded in his diary that he had to remain on duty one July evening until 11:15 p.m. "in consequence of a riot being anticipated between the members or runners of Engine Co. No. 21 & 22." This hostility may have developed out of a neighborhood or

ward rivalry. Although both companies housed their engines in the Sixth Ward near Elm Street, most members of Protector Company No. 22 lived east of the Bowery in the Fourth Ward, while Five Pointer Matthew T. Brennan's political allies dominated No. 21. Firemen also had to battle neighborhood gangs not affiliated with the department. Chief Alfred Carson reported in 1850 that "not long since, a Five Point club took engine No. 44 from the company, beat some of the company dreadfully, run it down to the Points, upset it, broke the engine, and ran away." The same gang stole "hose carriage No. 34" while at a fire near the Bowery Theater in retaliation, said the chief, for the attack of William M. Tweed's Engine Company No. 6 on hose company No. 31.²³

Mention of the young "Boss" Tweed (then twenty-seven years old) highlights the fire companies' important role in politics. A French visitor to New York in the 1840s learned that "the sporting fireman is in a certain circle a man of consideration. He plays an important part sometimes in the election, and is both throne and oracle in the public-houses." Tweed used the notoriety, respect, and friendships he earned as foreman of No. 6 to launch his political career in his native Fourth Ward.²⁴

Although the fire department was the most prestigious voluntary organization they could join, many Five Pointers were also attracted to the neighborhood's militia units. In the days before the United States maintained a large standing army, the nation depended on volunteer militia companies to defend it against attack. The threat of foreign invasion was increasingly remote by the late antebellum period, so in most militia companies picnics and drinking became more important than drilling. Mathews described another motive for forming a militia company. "To acquire steadiness in aiming the pipe [i.e., hoses] at fires, the Firemen often form themselves into target companies," he reported. Others simply enjoyed "parading the streets in a half-uniform, with a target borne aloft . . . pierced to the very centre with holes."

Although Five Points could boast its share of militia companies, they are much more difficult to trace than the well-documented fire units. We know that in early 1850, forty Sligo natives formed the Sarsfield Light Guards (named for Patrick Sarsfield, one of the commanders of the defeated Catholic army at the Battle of the Boyne), which drilled in Five Points at 502 Pearl Street in a room above the saloon operated by its first

captain. Another Irish-American military company in the neighborhood was the "Brennan Guards," named after ward heeler Matthew Brennan and commanded by his friend and fellow fireman Joseph Dowling.²⁵

Irish immigrants seemed especially interested in forming militia companies when events in Europe indicated a weakening of British ability to maintain control over Ireland. In 1853, for example, when the Crimean War brought the prospect of a reduced British military presence in Ireland, the New York Irish flooded into militia organizations, demonstrating that these groups perceived themselves as more than merely protectors of the United States. "You and I will be called to the rescue" of our native land, predicted one Irish American as he described the community's militia companies before a gathering of New York Sligo natives, "and deadly will be our vengeance on the seven hundred year oppression of old Ireland."²⁶

"TO MAINTAIN AND ESTABLISH THEIR CHARACTER AS MEN"

Of course, there were other, less political options for leisure. Some men chose athletics. Organized sports did not dominate men's social lives in the nineteenth century as they would later on, but the existence of a "Kenmare Hurlers" club indicates that some of the Lansdowne immigrants must have enjoyed that old Irish game on occasion. More prevalent were fraternal orders. Fraternal lodges were wildly popular in nineteenth-century America, with millions becoming Masons, Odd Fellows, Sons of Temperance, and Red Men. Five Pointers joined such groups, though they left few records behind. Some undoubtedly joined the Order of Ancient Hibernians, an outgrowth of one of the largest agrarian secret societies in Ireland. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the neighborhood's nativists probably enrolled in fraternal lodges such as the Order of United Americans. Young Tweed presided from 1848 to 1849 over one of these lodges, which met weekly at the foot of the Bowery.²⁷

Five Points' African Americans had their own fraternal organization, the New York African Society for Mutual Relief. Founded in 1808 to aid members "whom the vicissitudes of time or the freaks of fortune might reduce to want," the society moved to Five Points in 1820, purchasing the tenement at 42 Orange Street as an investment while using the rental income to pay benefits to members who were unable or too ill to find

work. Members erected a wooden building behind the tenement for their meetings. They installed a trapdoor in the floor to hide runaway slaves headed north on the Underground Railroad. Religious services and social events for the Five Points African-American community were held there as well. According to the reminiscences of fireman Florry Kernan, these activities continued until "the respectable residents of Orange Street, mostly negro families, began to move away" after the race riot of 1835. Then "the bell that each Sabbath morning tolled out a call for its congregation to assemble within its walls, that stood back in the rear from Orange Street near Leonard, was hushed; and that, too, moved to another spot to ring a welcome."²⁸

The best documented Five Points fraternal group was the Sligo Young Men's Association. Formed in September 1849 by thirty men, "mostly all natives of Sligo, Ireland," the Sligo Young Men's Association was the first Irish fraternal order in New York to base its membership on county of origin. Its founders organized the group, they explained, for "Mutual Benefit and Protection, and for the purpose of maintaining a friendly intercourse with each other, and to maintain and establish their character as men." After nearly one year of operation, however, only seventy of the several thousand Sligo natives living in New York had joined.²⁹

Perhaps the dues were too high. The semiannual "ball" organized by the society was not—at one dollar per person—outrageously expensive, though those wishing to attend did need formal attire. The society held the first of these gala events at Tammany Hall in February 1850, and the second six months later at "McCarthy's Hoboken Chateau." Many nonmembers seem to have attended these events, which received glowing reviews in the *Irish-American*. Its editor argued that the conspicuous consumption practiced at these events actually served a noble purpose, for it proved false "the calumnious statement that our position in America was 'one of poverty and shame.' . . . [T]hose who spend a delightful evening in the ball room, and combine for social and intellectual improvement, testify that they not only possess position and means, but have the spirit to keep pace with their fellow citizens in this regard."³⁰

Although newspapers described the Sligo association's balls in great detail, little is known about its weekly meetings. The group did have its own song, and the officers undoubtedly organized their "well filled treasury" for the "mutual benefit and protection" of the members in case of ill-

ness or death. The society also organized the Sligo Light Guard (as the Sarsfield Guard later renamed itself), and hoped "to amend the social condition of the poorer classes of their brothers, here and in Ireland." To this end, the Sligo association may have loaned money to members hoping to start businesses, as did the home-town societies created by subsequent Five Points immigrants from Italy and China. Five Pointers made up a significant proportion of the association's members. Nearly one-third of the members organizing the group's January 1851 ball lived or worked in the neighborhood. In the postbellum years, other county organizations (such as the Kerry Men's Society, which must have attracted some of the many Five Pointers from that district) were eventually formed as well. By the 1870s, at least eighteen Irish county societies operated in New York.³¹

The high costs of dues and balls may have discouraged many Five Pointers from joining one of these county societies, yet all but the most destitute could afford an occasional night out at one of the moderately priced theaters on the Bowery or Chatham Street. Bowery B'hoys and G'hals, and even bootblacks and newsboys, were devoted to the theater. They loved both lowbrow melodramas and classics such as Shakespeare. The best known of the city's inexpensive playhouses in that era was the Bowery Theater, located on that famous thoroughfare between Bayard and Canal Streets. Working-class New Yorkers flocked to the playhouse, even though the *Herald* in 1836 called the theater "the worst and wickedest that ever stood a month in any city under heaven." Foster agreed with the *Herald's* assessment, remarking that its upper galleries were "filled with rowdies, fancy men, working girls of doubtful reputation, and, last of all, the lower species of public prostitutes, accompanied by their 'lovyers' or such victims as they have been able to pick up."³²

Yet working-class men and women loved the raucous atmosphere of the Bowery Theater. A description of a performance in the 1870s gives a sense of the atmosphere. The featured attraction, noted Charles Haswell in his memoirs, was

a stock Irish play, in which a virtuous peasant girl and a high-minded patriot with knee-breeches, a brogue and an illicit whiskey-still, utterly expose and confound a number of designing dukes, lords, etc. . . . We idled about behind the seats of the balcony, with audible steps among the thick-strewn peanut-

shells. . . . I saw but two gloved women in the audience. . . . [B]eside the proper and prevailing peanut, the spectators refreshed themselves with a great variety of bodily nutriment. Ham sandwich and sausage seemed to have precedence, but pork chops were also prominent, receiving the undivided attention of a large family party in the second tier, the members of which consumed the chops with noble persistence through all of the intermissions. . . . The denuded bones were most of them playfully shied at the heads of acquaintances in the pit . . . if you hit the wrong man, you have only to look innocent and unconscious.

The audience frequently interrupted those on stage with comments about the plot. Actors expected this, and after an important line they would turn to the audience and ask, "Is that so, boys?" or "Don't you, boys?" and then the outcry and acclaim were so loud and long that all babies in the house cried out, which caused another terrible din." Patrons at least got their money's worth. When Haswell left at eleven forty-five, a third "piece" (probably a one-act play or vaudeville routine) was just

These theaters catered to their customers' interests and prejudices. In 1843, the Chatham Theater (a few blocks south of the Bowery Theater) premiered the first "blackface" musical troupe, the Virginia Minstrels. Portrayals of "Jim Crow" likewise drew big crowds at the Bowery. In the postbellum period, the Bowery staged a life of Custer in which Sitting Bull died at Little Bighorn.³⁴

But working-class theatergoers most loved to see themselves portrayed on stage. In 1848, actor and Five Points native Frank Chanfrau strode on stage with a fireman's red jacket, tight pants, and "soap locked" hair. The role was "Mose, the fire b'hoy," part of a short sketch of Bowery life meant to serve as an interlude between the full-length melodramas. The audience watched in rapt silence as Chanfrau's Mose took the cigar from his mouth, spit, and speaking of his fire company, defiantly declared that "I ain't a goin' to run with dat mercheen no more!" The crowd roared its approval. The sketch was such a hit that its author, Benjamin Baker, expanded it into an entire play, *A Glance at New York*. Like the real-life B'hoy, Mose was a loyal fireman ("I love that engine better than my dinner") and was always pining for a fight ("if I don't have a muss soon I'll spile"). The play was so popular that Chanfrau once performed in it at midday at the Olympic

Theater, in midafternoon at the Chatham, and in the evening across the Hudson in Newark. Numerous sequels followed, and dramas featuring Mose and his G'hal Lize dominated working-class theater throughout the 1850s.³⁵

Newsboys and bootblacks were especially avid theatergoers, so much so that they founded their own theater in a Five Points tenement basement. The tiny playhouse on Baxter Street just south of the Five Points intersection attracted little notice until late 1871, when the Russian grand duke Alexis visited the neighborhood during an American tour. His "slumming party" stopped at the youths' theater, bringing it to the attention of the general public and inspiring the lads to christen it "The Grand Duke's Opera House." "It is emphatically a boys' theatre, owned, built and managed by boys," commented *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* in 1874. "Boys are the stage-carpenters, actors, musicians, scene-shifters, money-takers, and the audience is, for the most part, composed of boys." An accordionist "accompanied by a bone-player" provided the music. Though the theater was supposed to hold only fifty, three times that number (mostly



"Interior of the Grand Duke's Theatre—The Audience during the Performance of the Thrilling Spectacle of the March of the 'Mulligan Guards,'" *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (January 17, 1874): 316. Collection of the Library of Congress.

"bootblacks and newsboys") had crowded in when a reporter from the *Herald* visited in February 1874. The theater became so famous that Horatio Alger included a chapter entitled "The Grand Duke's Opera House" in his novel *Julius the Street Boy* (1904).³⁶

"THE MOST REDOUBTABLE STRONGHOLD OF WICKEDNESS ON FIVE POINTS, IF NOT IN NEW-YORK"

Though Five Pointers, like all working-class New Yorkers, were passionate about the theater, they spent the bulk of their leisure time drinking and socializing at one of the neighborhood's bars. In nineteenth-century New York, both saloons and grocery stores sold alcohol by the glass, and Five Pointers had dozens of such establishments to choose from. In 1851, there were at least 252 saloons and groceries in Five Points' 22 blocks, or about a dozen per block. The more impoverished a street's residents, the more watering holes they had to choose from. Relatively affluent Mott and Bayard Streets contained only sixteen and eighteen liquor sellers respectively (and these were mostly grocers). Mulberry Street, in contrast, could boast forty-six "groggeries" while Orange Street had fifty-three (63 percent of which were saloons). The short block of Orange just north of the Five Points intersection, one of the most squalid in the neighborhood, had sixteen liquor sellers on its twenty lots.³⁷

The groceries in Five Points were mostly dark, dirty, depressing-looking establishments. Because the neighborhood's inhabitants did not generally have much money for discretionary spending, Five Points grocers specialized in "that class of commodities usually in demand where cheapness is the substitute for quality," wrote the *Clipper*. They stocked virtually everything a tenement resident might need—food, fuel, soap, candles, crockery, pipes, and tobacco. Grocers typically stored food in barrels and other items "behind the counter [in] tin boxes, devoid of their original laquer from wear of age and use. . . . At the end of the grease coated counter, furthest from the door, a portion is railed off and constitutes the inevitable bar," behind which "are ranged some score of tall-necked bottles. A beer barrel stands in the extreme corner, and in these articles we have the most lucrative portion of the grocer's trade, for no purchaser enters the murky store without indulging in a consolatory drink, be their sex as it may." Some groceries were equipped with billiard tables to

encourage customers to tarry and drink awhile. Prostitutes often loitered in them as well, reported Foster, looking for customers and "fortify[ing] themselves with alcohol for their nightly occupation."³⁸

"Crown's Grocery" was the best known in Five Points. Located since about 1840 at 150 Anthony Street (at the southwest corner of Little Water facing Paradise Park), Crown's was a neighborhood institution and, according to one of the Protestant charitable organizations working in the district, "the most redoubtable stronghold of wickedness on Five Points, if not in New-York." Situated a few steps below street level in an "old dilapidated" three-story frame building, Crown's "combined groggery and grocery" did a thriving business. According to George Foster, a cornucopia of sights and smells overwhelmed the Five Pointer who descended the stairs and entered Crown's emporium:

It is not without difficulty that we effect an entrance, through the baskets, barrels, boxes, Irish women and sluttish house-keepers, white, black, yellow, and brown, thickly crowding the walk, up to the very threshold—as if the store were too full of its commodities and customers, and some of them had tumbled and rolled outdoors. On either hand piles of cabbages, potatoes, squashes, egg-plants, tomatoes, turnips, eggs, dried apples, chesnuts and beans rise like miniature mountains round you. At the left hand as you enter is a row of little boxes, containing anthracite and charcoal, nails, plug-tobacco, &c. &c. which are dealt out in any quantity, from a bushel or a dollar to a cent's-worth. On a shelf near by is a pile of fire-wood, seven sticks for sixpence, or a cent apiece, and kindling-wood three sticks for two cents. Along the walls are ranged upright casks containing lamp-oil, molasses, rum, whisky, brandy, and all sorts of cordials (carefully manufactured in the back room, where a kettle and furnace, with all the necessary instruments of spiritual devilment, are provided for the purpose). The cross-beams that support the ceiling are thickly hung with hams, tongues, sausages, strings of onions, and other light and airy articles, and at every step you tumble over a butter-firkin or a meal-bin. Across one end of the room runs a "long, low, black" counter, armed at either end with bottles of poisoned fire-water, doled out at three cents a glass to the loafers and bloated women

who frequent the place—while the shelves behind are filled with an uncatalogueable jumble of candles, allspice, crackers, sugar and tea, pickles, ginger, mustard, and other kitchen necessities. In the opposite corner is a shorter counter filled with three-cent pies, mince, apple, pumpkin and custard—all kept smoking hot—where you can get a cup of coffee with plenty of milk and sugar, for the same price, and buy a hat-full of "Americans with Spanish wrappers" [cigars] for a penny.³⁹

Crown profited handsomely from his business acumen. After fewer than ten years in business on Anthony Street, the Irish immigrant could afford to establish a "drygoods" outlet on Division Street as well. Crown apparently could not resist the very spirits he peddled, however—he supposedly "died of intemperance" in late 1857. Reformers hoped that Crown's death would lead to the demise of his "rum shop." Instead, his wife Susan became the proprietor, and it became known as "Mrs. Crown's." Two years later, upward of a thousand Five Pointers continued to patronize it daily.⁴⁰

Most Five Pointers chose to do their drinking in saloons rather than groceries. Though temperance advocates perceived little difference between the two, the atmosphere in a saloon varied from that of a grocery in many ways. While German grocery proprietors outnumbered their Irish counterparts by about two to one, Irish Americans were four times more likely than Germans to operate a Five Points saloon. The interior of a saloon also bore little resemblance to that of a grocery. In contrast to the crowded grocery, a saloon was a long, narrow open space, with a long bar running down one wall and an empty floor opposite it to accommodate the crowds that might visit at lunchtime and in the evening. Sawdust covered the floors to sop up spit tobacco juice and spilt beer, and a large stove stood at the center of the room to provide warmth during the winter. Only saloons catering specifically to Germans offered their patrons tables and chairs. Five Points saloons lacked seats primarily because there was no space for them. But drinkers did not linger long in a single bar anyway. After a glass or two (enough to treat and be treated), the drinker and his friends generally went up the block or around the corner to another favorite watering hole. Finally, unlike the grocery, the New York saloon was an overwhelmingly male domain. Women could drink in groceries, but were rarely found in Five Points saloons.⁴¹

Many nineteenth-century New Yorkers associated Five Points with saloons. The earliest descriptions of the neighborhood give prominent place to its "grog shops" and "tippling houses." One writer, Luc Sante, even credits Five Points with the invention of the American saloon, insisting that "the saloon, as it came to be known, loved, and reviled, was born . . . in the area of the Five Points." No evidence exists to substantiate this claim. Saloons evolved from pubs and taverns, a feature of New York life long before Five Points' streets were even laid out. Yet saloons did occupy an important place in the social life of the typical male Five Pointer. Newspaperman and politico Mike Walsh noted that saloons were so popular in neighborhoods such as Five Points because the immigrants had "scarcely room enough to turn around" inside their tenements. Charles Loring Brace agreed that in comparison to the depressing conditions facing the immigrant at home, in a saloon "he can find jolly companions, a lighted and warmed room, a newspaper, and, above all, a draught which . . . can change poverty into riches, and drive care and labor and the thought of all his burdens and annoyances far away. The liquor shop is his picture-gallery, club, reading-room, and social *salon*, at once. His glass is the magic transmuter of care to cheerfulness, of penury to plenty, of a low, ignorant, worried life, to an existence for the moment buoyant, contented, and hopeful." The saloon also offered more tangible attractions, such as free lunches, bowling, billiards, raffles, card games like poker and faro, and even cockfights.⁴²

The saloonkeeper himself frequently drew patrons to his establishment through his popularity or prominence. Many a Five Pointer must have found it exciting to sidle up to Yankee Sullivan's Centre Street bar and share a drink with the famous prizefighter, or hobnob with the neighborhood's leading politicians at Matt Brennan's Monroe Hall. Even in the absence of a celebrity proprietor, Irish Five Pointers, like their countrymen everywhere in America, preferred "the bar-keeper whose name has in it the flavour of the shamrock."⁴³

But most Five Pointers respected their barkeepers primarily for their palpable power within the neighborhood. The saloonkeeper "was a social force in the community," remembered one self-proclaimed "son of the Bowery," Charles Stelzle, of his postbellum youth in the Five Points vicinity:

Often he secured work for both the workingman and his children. . . . [A]s a young apprentice, when I was arrested . . . the first

man to whom my friends turned was the saloon-keeper on the block. And he furnished bail gladly. He was doing it all the time. He had close affiliation with the dominant political party; he was instrumental in getting the young men of the neighborhood on the police force and into the fire department, the most coveted jobs in the city among my young workmen friends. He lent money . . . [and] no questions were asked as to whether or not the recipient was deserving.

As a result of such kindness, immigrants deferred to their saloonkeepers in virtually every arena, even making them "officials in the church societies, marshals in church processions, [and] chairmen in church meetings." Matthew Breen summed up the feelings of most Irish immigrants when he stated that "there is no more charitable man living on the face of the earth than the New York liquor dealer."⁴⁴

Gambling attracted many Five Pointers into the local saloons. Many competed at poker, but at midcentury the most popular card game was faro, a kind of card version of roulette in which players must bet on which card will be turned over next. Bars that featured these games of chance were some of the most infamous in the district. "Regular gambling-holes, they are; the dens of the Five Points!" exclaimed a shocked French actor who paid a policeman for a tour of the worst dives. "The frequenters of these dens play cards with shabby coats, sleeves rolled up, a pipe in their mouths, a loaded revolver by their sides, and a well-sharpened knife under their hands." Despite the hyperbole, there was some truth to his statements. Stabbings—some even fatal—were a staple of the Five Points gambling den. But a neighborhood resident would have had little to fear from merely entering one of the district's gaming saloons.⁴⁵

Although no longer associated with wagering, bowling (probably the version now referred to as "duck pins") was also a gambler's sport in nineteenth-century New York, and many Five Points saloons featured the game. On his tour of New York in 1841, Dickens often saw at the top of cellar stairs "a painted lamp [which] directs you to the Bowling Saloon, or Ten-Pin alley; Ten-Pins being a game of mingled chance and skill, invented when the legislature passed an act forbidding Nine-Pins." Foster reported that "there are not less than four hundred of these fruitful sources of corruption in our city, plying their detestable trade with an activity that would

do honor to a better calling. . . . On Saturday nights they are usually most crowded, and often keep in hot blast until the morning bells of the Sabbath compel their frequenters to slink away to a less noisy kind of dissipation." An 1880 insurance map shows that Five Pointers bowled in the alleys behind the saloons at 51 and 63 Baxter Street, whence the origin of the term "bowling alley." Boys often became acquainted with bowling by working in saloons. "They wait upon the players, setting up the pins, returning the balls, fetching a light for their segars, supplying them with liquor when thirsty," and received in return a small sum from the saloonkeeper and tips from lucky bowlers. One such "pin boy" was Timothy Harrington, a Lansdowne immigrant who came to New York with a brother and three sisters in 1851. Two years later, fourteen-year-old Timothy lived with his seventeen-year-old brother John in the heart of the Lansdowne enclave at 155 Anthony Street and supported himself setting up pins in a "bowling alley."⁴⁶

Not all Five Points gambling took place in saloons. In fact, the neighborhood's most popular form of wagering was "policy gambling," private lotteries in which players tried to guess which numbers would be selected in a daily drawing. The more numbers guessed correctly, the more the player won. "The evil of all other modes of gaming sink[s] into insignificance in comparison with this," opined the *National Police Gazette* in an 1845 exposé on policy gambling, "as it is the only one which extends its havoc to the poor, and its corrupting mania to the females of that class." Some made their wagers by visiting policy offices. Others placed their bets with runners who, according to the *Gazette*, "penetrate into their very dwellings, and dog them to their places of work, for the last few pennies which a latent sense of prudence had reserved for food." For help in selecting their numbers, players often turned to "policy dream books," which explained how a gambler's dreams revealed his or her daily lucky numbers. The so-called father of the policy business, Moses Baker, based his operations at the eastern end of Five Points at 1 Chatham Square. That "prognosticators of lucky numbers were held in high repute with the denizens of the Points" also reflected the popularity of policy in the neighborhood.⁴⁷

Gambling attracted many Five Pointers to the district's saloons; music and dancing enticed other customers into dance halls. The Five Points dance halls were concentrated on Anthony Street between Centre and Orange. Kernan remembered that they "were all fitted up in the same way; that is, there was the clean sanded floor, its red bombazine curtains at the

shop-windows and doors, its whitewashed walls and ceiling, from which hung a hoop chandelier, which daily was replenished with new candles." Of course, the many dance halls located in cellars usually had no head-room for chandeliers. House of Industry founder Lewis Pease visited a dance hall in Cow Bay housed in "a low, damp, dingy basement, twelve feet wide by thirty long." Its ceiling was so low that taller customers had to duck to avoid hitting the floor joists. "The place was jammed so full, as not to leave room for the musician to sit, or even to draw his bow standing, without hitting some one," reported Pease, "while the steam and stench that issued therefrom was perfectly stifling." Kernan recalled that because these dance halls were so tiny, "a long bench on each side of the room was all the seats you could find, the object being to leave as much room for the dancers as possible. Away in one corner was a small bar, or counter, from which you could purchase ale, porter, or spruce beer by the glass publicly, ardent spirits by the half-pint slyly."⁴⁸

Five Points dance halls attracted a wide variety of customers, from both within and outside the neighborhood. According to Foster, sailors and "the b'hoys, members of rowdy clubs and those who 'run' with the engines," were especially loyal customers. Kernan concurred, recalling that "it was a jubilee, indeed, to the landlords of the Points when the crew of a United States ship-of-war got paid off." Blacks and whites danced in the same basements, some wearing coats and boots while others went shirt-sleeved and barefooted. Dance halls did an especially brisk business when a favorite musician was scheduled to perform. "Jack Ballagher, the black musical wonder," was Five Points' "famed fiddler," recounted Kernan. He drew a throng of dancers whenever he rosined his bow. Dancing establishments also thrived during cold weather. "The homes of the poor in the Points are not fit places in which to spend an evening pleasantly," commented the *Tribune* in explaining this surge in business, "for in most of them there are from four to a dozen individuals—the rooms are dirty and unventilated, consequently the inhabitants are forced into the streets to find either pleasure or comfort. But in cold weather the streets are too bleak, therefore to find what they seek they are in many cases compelled to resort to the theater, the dance-house, or the gambling or drinking saloon." As long as Five Pointers continued to inhabit overcrowded tenement apartments, concluded the *Tribune*, it would be impossible to keep them "from these wicked and degrading amusements."⁴⁹

Of the many dance halls, one—Pete Williams's place—became by mid-century a virtual city landmark. A tourist believed that he "had not seen New York city unless he had visited Uncle Pete's," located at 67 Orange Street just south of Bayard. The establishment's fame dated back to 1842, when Charles Dickens featured the saloon—then called Almack's—in *American Notes*. Yet frustratingly little is known about Pete Williams himself. Foster described him as "a middle-aged, well-to-do, coal-black negro, who has made an immense amount of money from the profits of his dance-house—which, unfortunately, he regularly gambles away at the sweat-cloth of the roulette-table as fast as it comes in. He glories in being a bachelor . . . is a great admirer of the drama," and owned a team of fast horses that he loved to race. While virtually nothing else is known about him, Williams was remembered well after his death as "a great mogul on the Points."⁵⁰

Pete Williams's basement differed little in appearance from other neighborhood dance halls. Despite its scandalous reputation, commented Nathaniel Willis, "really it looked very clean and cheerful. It was a spacious room with a low ceiling, excessively whitewashed, nicely sanded,



BACKGROUND OF CIVILIZATION.—BALL-ROOM OF MR. PETE WILLIAMS, DECEASED, AT PRESENT CONDUCTED BY MR. FRITZES. (See page 20.)

Pete Williams's Dance Hall, 1860. *New York Illustrated News* (February 18, 1860): 217. Collection of the author.

and well lit, and the black proprietor and his 'ministering spirits' (literally fulfilling their vocation behind a very tidy bar) were well-dressed and well-mannered people." But it was the mixing of blacks and whites on the dance floor that shocked well-to-do visitors. "Several very handsome mulatto women were in the crowd," Willis noted in the early 1840s, "and a few 'young men about town,' mixed up with the blacks; and altogether it was a picture of 'amalgamation,' such as I had never before seen." The *New York Clipper* agreed that at Pete Williams's place, "amalgamation reigned predominant, if we may judge from appearances." Outsiders viewed the mixing of the races—especially in the close, sweaty, and sexually charged context of the dance hall—as one of the most scandalous features of such Five Points establishments.⁵¹

Visitors' descriptions of the dancing at Pete Williams's place combined this moral indignation with prurient fascination. As the dancing commenced, the proceedings seemed innocent enough. According to Foster, "each gentleman, by a simultaneous and apparently preconcerted movement, now 'drawrs' his 'chawr' of tobacco, and depositing it carefully in his trowsers pocket, flings his arms about his buxom inamorata and salutes her whisky-breathing lips with a chaste kiss, which extracts a scream of delight from the delicate creature, something between the whoop of an Indian and the neighing of a horse. And now the orchestra strikes up 'Cooney in de Holler' and the company 'cavorts to places.'" But as the dancing progressed and the musicians picked up the pace, the passion of the dancers became far too palpable. "The spirit of the dance is fully aroused," observed Reverend Pease. "On flies the fiddle-bow, faster and faster; on jingles tambourine 'gainst head and heels, knee and elbow, and on smash the dancers. The excitement becomes general. Every foot, leg, arm, head, lip, body, all are in motion. Sweat, swear, fiddle, dance, shout, and stamp, underground in smoke, and dust, and putrid air!" The fiddler compelled the dancers to quicken the tempo further, observed Foster, until "all observance of the figure is forgotten and every one leaps, stamps, screams and hurras on his or her own hook. . . . The dancers, now wild with excitement . . . leap frantically about like howling dervishes, clasp their partners in their arms, and at length conclude the dance in hot confusion and disorder."⁵²

AS THIS NEARLY OVERT SUGGESTION of orgasm implies, most middle- and upper-class New Yorkers found Five Pointers' modes of entertainment shocking and depraved. Although gambling, the theater, the fire and militia companies, the dance halls and saloons, and the subcultures that flourished in them were hardly illegal, it seemed to many New Yorkers that each of these licit activities led inexorably to others that were illicit. The fire companies brawled and rioted; the dance halls encouraged lewdness and promiscuity; the saloons and gambling dens fostered public drunkenness and crime; the sporting men promoted illegal prizefighting; and the working-class theaters (as well as the dance halls and the Bowery) were filled with prostitutes. Despite the neighborhood's vibrant and multifaceted cultural life, these vices would come to dominate Americans' perception of Five Points.

7

PROLOGUE

THE BARE-KNUCKLE PRIZEFIGHT BETWEEN
YANKEE SULLIVAN AND TOM HYER

FIVE POINTERS loved a good fight. Their propensity to riot was notorious. Election day in the neighborhood rarely ended without blackened eyes and bloodied lips. When fights broke out on the street, passersby typically circled round and egged on the combatants rather than break them up. Five Pointers often agreed to settle their grudges with fights. In 1856, for example, two well-known brawlers, Jim Moroney of the Fourth Ward and Tim Connolly of the Sixth, decided to resolve their ongoing feud with a boxing match in Weehawken, New Jersey, where Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton had settled their differences a half century earlier. The Irish were not the neighborhood's only brawlers. When one well-known Five Points boxer put on an exhibition in 1848, the "very promising New York novices" on the undercard included a few "Chatham street Jews." But the greatest Five Points fight of all, one of the most famous prizefights in American boxing history, a match that until the 1880s or '90s was the most talked about fight of the nineteenth century, was the 1849 battle between Tom Hyer and Yankee Sullivan.¹

Yankee Sullivan was born Frank Ambrose in Bandon, Cork, in about 1807. At the age of twenty-three, the "freckled-face, ginger-haired, pug-nosed" young man with the "close-cropped, bullet-like head," already a renowned fighter in Liverpool, was arrested for an unknown felony and punished with transportation to Australia. He escaped in 1839 and sailed for America, landing at Sag Harbor, Long Island. Returning to England in 1840 to resume his boxing career, he took the name Jim Sullivan to avoid detection by the police, adding the nickname "Yankee" (whether of his