

The Five Points Mission

Archibald Russell was an important contributor to the Five Points Mission. The following is a short description of the Five Points slum and the work of the Five Points Mission and the Five Points House of Industry

Five Points refers to a small parcel of New York City which roughly corresponds with the present day Chinatown. The five points referred to an intersection of Orange and Cross Streets where Worth Street terminated as it fed in from the West. When the area became a notorious slum the city changes the names of the streets to Baxter Street and Park Street, and later Worth Street was extended to Chatham Square. The approximate extent of the Five Points slum was Bowery on the east, Canal on the North, and Elm (now Lafayette) on the west.

In the late eighteenth century, there was a fresh water lake called the Collect (after the Dutch word kolch meaning small pond) and a hill to the north of the lake which was a popular picnic area for New Yorkers. They could sit on the hill and view the waters of the East and North Rivers. The area began to run down when several tanneries and a slaughter house located on the south side of the lake. The city fathers decided to fill in the lake using the dirt from the hill. This happened in 1808, but the area remained swampy. Currently Foley Square sits atop the old Collect. The area became the first housing for immigrants after 1810, as other persons moved further north. It achieved notoriety by 1840.

By 1840, the population consisted mostly of Irish and Jewish immigrants and freed slaves. There was a race riot against the freed slaves in 1834, and that portion of the population dwindled progressively after, but there were always a small group of blacks. The residents were housed in buildings which usually were of two stories, with windows facing the street and the back, but the rooms between had no windows and were used for bedrooms. Observers noted that the bedrooms approximately 12 feet square often housed 13 to 20 souls, usually sleeping on rags on the floor. There was a de facto segregation of housing, with the Jewish occupying the east section of Mott Street and Elizabeth Street, African Americans along Mission Place and Park Street, and Irish in the other parts. The laws effecting tenement construction were ineffective. One law insisted that every bedroom and bathroom have a window. The winner of a design competition was the 'dumbbell' tenement by architect James E. Ware, which provided a narrow indentation in the middle of the tenement, and became the dominant style of new tenements. Builders placed two such tenements next to each other, which formed narrow airshafts. Unfortunately, these airshafts became collectors of garbage and items tossed out of windows. However, the conditions of occupants did improve under changes in city law.

Why did the Irish come? Because conditions in Ireland were even worse. The famine years devastated the population. The Irish were from twelve counties, but the most of them arrived from Sligo, Cork and Kerry. Cork is easily understood, as its population of 850,000 could supply plenty of emigrants. Sligo is a sparsely populated county. The reason seems to be that in Kerry the third marquis of Lansdowne and in Sligo Lord Palmerston and Sir Robert Gore Booth financed programs to pay the boat fare of tenants

who would agree to move to Canada or the United States. This seems philanthropic, but their estate foremen proved to them that sending the people to America was cheaper than their cost to maintain the same people in poor houses. One unfortunate side effect was that the persons chosen were often those least capable of working; many of them did not survive the difficult journey, and after arrival they did not have the capacity or skills to work.

How did they work? Sporadically... Most of them worked at unskilled jobs when they could. Others became street vendors. Children were sent out to find spare pieces of coal for fuel. Still others were beggars. When they could work, they faced 10 hour days, 6 days per week. Women often took in laundry, or sewing in their own homes, being paid per piece.

How did they play and/or socialize? The housing was miserable, so solace was sought in the 252 saloons and grocery stores in Five Points' 22 blocks. Groceries always had a small space at the end of the counter which acted as a bar. Women generally did not enter saloons. The Bowery was a lively street, with street vendors and performers; one visitor thought the street "looks like a vast holiday fair two miles long." There were bars, and beer halls with billiard tables, bowling alleys and an orchestra. Closer to home there was prostitution, gambling (poker and a simpler game called faro), and duck pins. Dancing was also very popular. The people liked theater, especially shows which portrayed themselves. Minstrels were popular, and there was even a children's theater once visited by the Czar. Many social associations were formed, the first being for Sligo immigrants, but the most popular societies were the Fire Companies, which added excitement to the neighborhood with their rivalries in fighting fires, but also formed an avenue to advancement in the politics of the Democratic Party.

To an American Protestant society, just about everything about Five Points was sinful. The inhabitants were foreign to the dominant Protestant culture, spoke Gaelic or Yiddish or the accent of the blacks. Clearly they were an inferior breed. Since the politicians did little or nothing to ameliorate the situation, the work to reform fell to missionary societies. The standard churches had fled the area. In 1846 there were Baptist, Episcopal, Swedenborgian, African-American and Welsh Baptist churches; they were all gone by 1855. There were two Roman Catholic churches just outside the Five Points area. There were several Jewish congregations, usually housed in upper rooms.

Beginning in 1830, a variety of evangelical Christian groups attempted to win converts in Five Points. From the start the reformers were of two minds concerning spiritual and worldly assistance -- a split which would last. In 1839 the American Female Moral Reform Society began giving out food and clothing and sometimes sought jobs for the unemployed and shelter for the homeless. The Tract Society, on the other hand, concentrated on conversion attempts and created a separate group for its temporal work, under Robert Hartley, who set the standards of assistance which would be adopted by almost all charities in the nineteenth century. These charities operated in many areas of New York, but there soon arose operations which concentrated strictly on Five Points.

The most famous of these was the First Union Mission, a consortium of several Protestant groups. In May 1850 it began to operate the Five Points Mission, and selected as its resident minister Lewis M. Pease, and innovative

Methodist minister from Lenox Massachusetts. Pease soon disagreed with the Missionary Society on the mission's goals. The Society expected Pease to visit potential converts, explain the 'errors' of Catholicism and the superiority of Methodism. Pease found that this approach had little impact in Five Points. He decided that he ought to provide help to alleviate hunger and gain skills to enable people to be gainfully employed.

Soon he started an operation for women to sew shirts. He insisted that they do not drink on his job, attend a church service of their own choice on the Sabbath. He found the women had difficulty maintaining this discipline if they returned to their shabby tenements, so he began to provide housing in a rented building. He also insisted that the mission establish a school during the week as well as the Sunday school. When the mission board declined to fund these ventures, he resigned and established a second society, the Five Points House of Industry. At first this was supported by a Temperance Society, but a change of control in the Temperance Society led to a withdrawal of support.

Pease had by this time had impressed many with his industry and imagination. The Rev. Gregory Bedell of the Episcopal Church of the Ascension, which had been financing Pease's school, organized a group of philanthropists to support Pease's work. Archibald Russell was a key figure in this group. Some writers connect Russell to the Five Points Mission, but it is more likely that he helped found the Five Points House of Industry and served as its board chairman for eighteen years. The House received widespread publicity. Even from Cleveland, a young John Rockefeller sent 10¢ of his weekly salary of \$4.00

Soon after the House of Industry established its lodging for women and children, the Five Points Mission followed suit, and the two 'rivals' became the dominant charitable institutions in Five Points. Gradually the institutions became discouraged at converting the adults and began to focus on the children. This led to a very controversial operation, providing adoptive parents in the West for Five Points children. Not all were orphans, some were given over by their parents who could not provide for them, others children asked to be adopted, and in some cases, the officers of the mission used the court system to be awarded custody of the children. Groups of twenty or thirty children would be placed on a train, and at each stop would perform, where one or two would be adopted until they were all taken. The adoptive parents were Protestant, and this aroused the ire of the Roman Catholic groups in New York City.

One of the first measures taken by the Roman Catholic church was to establish a parish within Five Points itself. In 1853, Archbishop Hughes purchased the recently vacated Zion Protestant Episcopal Church and it became the Church of the Transfiguration. The building had been erected in 1801 using stone rubble that was used to build St. Paul's Chapel, an historic Anglican church on lower Broadway. Founded as a Lutheran parish, the congregation later embraced the Episcopal faith in 1810. Soon the Roman Catholic parish became the busiest in New York City, and was generally considered an 'Irish' parish. By 1863 the New York Catholics began their own adoption services -- because Civil War casualties created a large number of children without fathers to support them. The Catholic Protectory sought to avoid sending children out of the city by finding adoptive parents with New York. But the numbers of children needing assistance grew, and the New York

Foundling Hospital was founded in 1869 and began transferring children to predominantly Catholic communities in the Midwest.

The reader ought not assume that everything was evil about Five Points. For many immigrants it was the first step to success in the New World. Many moved quickly out of Five Points to other safer neighborhoods. To cite a personal example, I have been able to trace my mother's family back to 1848 at Broome Street, several blocks north of Five Points. The father was from Cork, so it would not be unreasonable to believe that he spent his first days at Five Points. By the 1870s the family had migrated to Hoboken and Queens. This pattern would be typical of Irish immigrants.

Shortly after the Civil War the complexion of the neighborhood changed. By 1880 there were as many Italians as Irish in Five Points, and by 1890 Italians made up 49%, Jewish 18% and Irish 10% of the population, with another 17% unidentified. Initially most Italian immigrants came from the province of Liguria whose capital is the port of Genoa. But another large group came from the southern half of Italy, notable Campania (Naples) and Basilicata just south of Campania. Before 1875, most Italians emigrated to South America, notably Argentina, but after this date the bulk of immigrants came to New York. Many settled north of Canal, but the most impoverished settled in the lower part of Five Points.

Italians did not immediately adapt to New York foods, and tended to maintain their culinary diets. This gave rise to several Italian groceries, which also formed the social hub of the community. Many became street vendors, of which organ grinders with their pet monkeys were the most notable. Italians also took over the lowest status jobs which were now being abandoned by the Irish. In a notable example, they became the railroad builders, supplanting the Irish. Many men went across country to work on railroads during the warm months, and then returned to Five Points during the winter, attempting to survive on their summer earnings. Like the Irish, the Italians were not a unified group, and rival groups struggled for informal control of the territory.

The Roman Catholic Church does not get high marks for its treatment of the Italian immigrants. A small church servicing Italians had been established in 1866 outside the Five Points, and the priests of Transfiguration routinely sent their Italians there for confessions, marriages, baptisms and funerals, even though it was 1 1/2 miles away. When the Irish pastor of Transfiguration asked Archbishop Corrigan for an Italian speaking priest, he confined the Italian Masses to the basement. The poor treatment of Italians, not only in Five Points but in many parishes elsewhere, reached Rome, and in the 1890s Pope Leo XIII expressed his displeasure at the treatment of Italians both in writing and in meetings with American bishops. Pope Leo asked Bishop Scalabrini to train priests in Italy to service the New York Italians and in 1888 a separate parish was set up in Five Points for the Italian community.

Added to ecclesiastic mistreatment by Irish-dominated clergy was political mistreatment by Irish-dominated politicians in the Democratic party. Some writers indicate that many Italians when they eventually joined in the political arena became Republicans because of the political and religious mistreatment..

By the last decade of the nineteenth century, the Italians were supplanted by Chinese. Many of these came from California because of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the mistreatment of Chinese in California. Like the Irish and Italians before them, the Chinese were not a uniform group, and the famous tong wars virtually duplicated the divisions previously seen by the Italian and Irish gangs. Such division exist even today: Transfiguration Church has three Sunday Masses, all in the upper church. One is in English, another in Mandarin Chinese, and the third in Cantonese Chinese! But this part of Five Points history lies outside the scope of our interest, because Archibald Russell died in 1871, and he is the reason we are writing about Five Points ...

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, most of the Five Points tenements were razed to erect public buildings. The Foley Square courthouses are sited on the old Collect, and Worth Street is now extended to Chatham Square. Five Points' reputation as the worse slum in the world lost its claim to other parts of New York City, such as Hell's Kitchen, and to other cities of the world.

References:

Tyler Anbinder, Five Points. the 19th-Century New York City Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum, New York, The Free Press, 2001, 532 pp. Information drawn mainly from chapter Eight: Religion and Reform, pp 235 - 268

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