

## The Five Points

When, in a controversial speech about welfare reform in July 1994, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan alluded to the 11 wild Irish slums of the 19th Century Eastern Seaboard," he was referring to the Five Points. When, In 1835, Davy Crockett said, "In my part of the country, when you meet an Irishman, you find a first-rate gentleman; but these are worse than savages; they are too mean to swab hell's kitchen," he was referring to the Five Points. When, in 1842, Charles Dickens referred to "hideous tenements which take their names from robbery and murder; all that is loathsome, drooping and decayed is here," he was referring to the Five Points. What is the Five Points?

The Five Points was a Part of the "Ould Sixth Ward" of 19th century New York City. Today, the Civic Center covers what some say was the worst slum in the deplorable history of slums. The area was the site of the, beautiful Collect Pond of early New York history which deteriorated as polluting businesses settled in the, area. The. Pond was drained, filled in and built over without proper regard for its softness as a building site. Even today engineers have to account for the water table of this site. The inevitable deterioration of the housing led to an influx of the most deprived New Yorkers of the time, African Americans and Irish. Coincident with the Great Famine the Irish population in New York City rose from 961,719 in 1850 to 1,611,304 in 1860.

Many of the immigrants lived in abject poverty. In the late,19th century, one report on tenement life counted one bath tub for 1321 families and one water tap at best for a floor of apartments. Kerosene stoves and businesses that used naphtha, benzene and other flammables made fire a daily hazard. Alcoholism was so common that the word, "saloon" is said to be, a Five Points coinage to name "groggeries" which occupied the back rooms of grocery stores. Poverty and gangs go hand in hand, the Five Points being the breeding gang of Irish gangs such as the Plug Uglies, the Forty Thieves, the Chichesters, the Dead Rabbits and the Kerryonians. These gangs were so tough and reckless that the police were reluctant to enter the Five Points. Davy Crockett himself said lie would "rather risk myself in an Indian fight than venture among these creatures after night."

The Five Points slum was so notorious that it attracted the attention of candidate Abraham Lincoln who visited the area before his Cooper Union Address. The Ladies Home Mission Society in 1852 bought and razed the Old Brewery which had been a flop house for Irish and Black homeless since 1837 and the site of a murder a night for fifteen years. It was replaced by

the Five Points Mission. The crusading journalist Jacob Riis succeeded in having a park built at Mulberry Bend in the Five Points. Ali expanding New York City economy and socially responsible planning helped to push the Five Points into the footnotes of history. However, its mystique lives on, captured in the novels [The Alienist](#) by Caleb Carr and [Banished Children of Eve](#) by Peter Quinn. Read the books, visit the Civic Center to sense the Five Points.

(Written by John Walsh and originally printed in September 1994)

© Irish Cultural Society of the Garden City Area