

# A Personal Account of the Five Points Excavation

by Jim Lally

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As with most of the archeological work carried on in New York City, the "Five Points" site is an example of a salvage excavation. This means that the archeological/historical resource will be destroyed in the process of digging the deep foundation for a new multistory building; but first an excavation team of researchers and field technicians attempts to systematically uncover, document and sample the cultural material of the people who occupied or worked on the site, in accordance with federal law. The former location of the block (roughly bounded by present day Pearl Street on the west, Park Row on the south, Worth Street on the east and Cardinal Hayes Place on the north and encompassing the former Baxter Street) will be the site of a new federal courthouse. In a construction site at Broadway and Reade Street, the same archeological team is excavating the graves of more than four hundred black inhabitants of colonial New York in the city's original black burial ground.



I think I first heard about the infamous "Five Points" and its environs—the "collect pond," once a favored fishing hole for the Native American and early Dutch inhabitants of Manhattan, later a foul-smelling cesspool polluted by surrounding tanneries, the notorious one-murder-a-night "old brewery" and the "Plug Ugly" and "Dead Rabbit" gangs—on one of Dr. James Shenton's Civil War draft riot walking tours. This same tour mentioned the nearby Egyptian revival "Tombs," the NYPD's "Fort Apache" of the nineteenth century, but I already knew of it from having spent a boyhood summer in the attic reading great-grandma Valentine Dietrich's lurid 1870's book about the jail. In fact, great-grandpa always claimed that, as a boy living in Hell's Kitchen, he had seen a black man hung from a lamppost during these riots. Or perhaps I heard about the sprawling Irish slum from Bill Ochs or Joe Doyle when I conducted excavations in the power canal system of Paterson, New Jersey and we discussed the adjacent Irish mill worker's district, "Dublin." No matter, for when I read that archeologist, mentor and friend, Big Ed Rutsch was excavating the site, I determined to go and have a look for myself.

By the 1970's, the buildings in the area of the excavation had been sheared off to create parking lots and parks. Even in an

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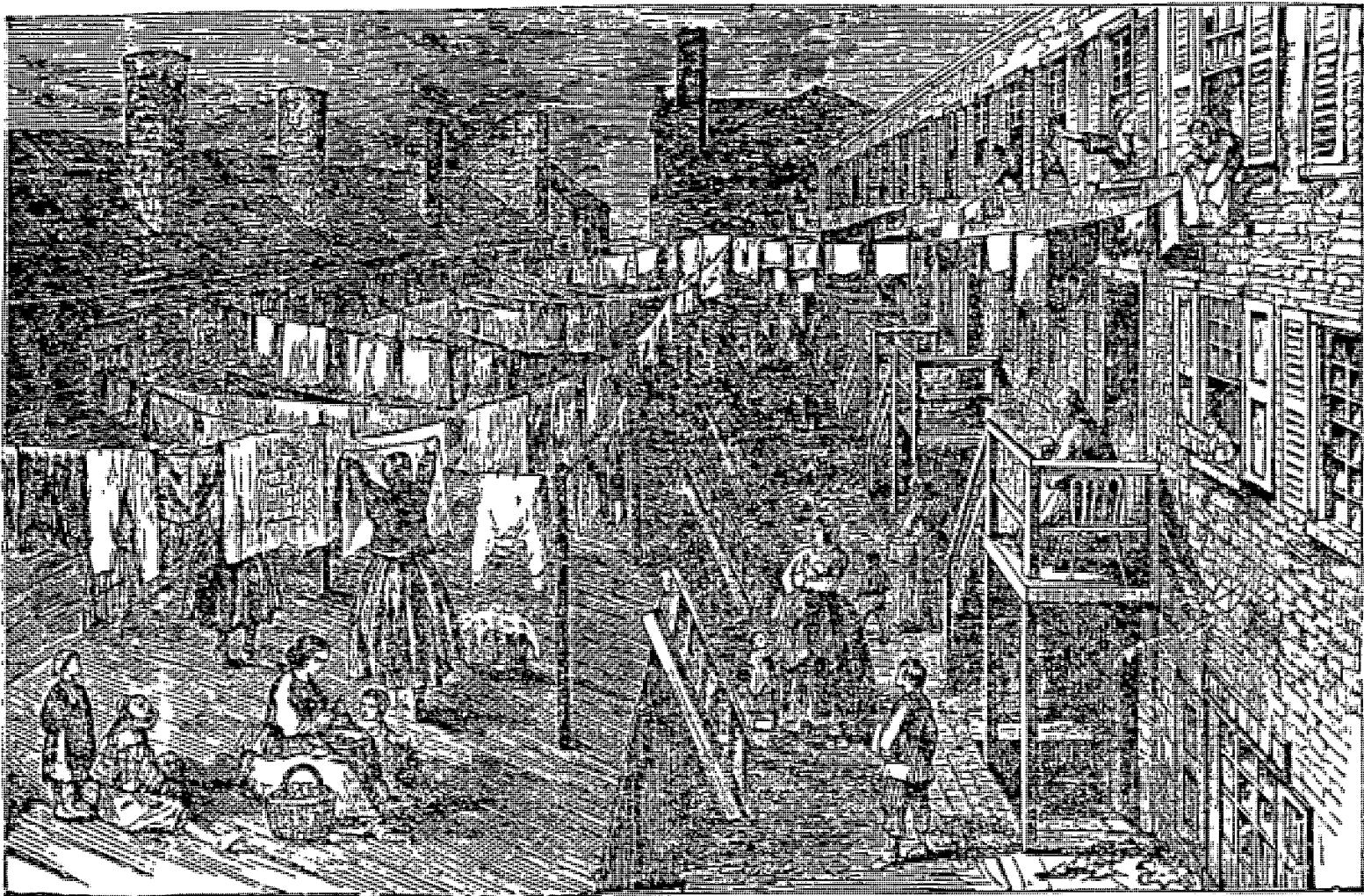
urban environment as densely crowded as Manhattan this effectively sealed off such below street level features as cellars, alleyways, privies, cisterns and trashpits. In the block that was being excavated, contemporary maps showed buildings dating to the late 18th century. Originally middle class and commercial, it passed through a period of industrialization as tanneries and slaughterhouses were built nearby. It was these earlier buildings and later frame and brick tenements that were occupied by the post-Famine Irish immigrants, the Germans and Blacks, and their Italian and Chinese successors.

Thus it was that I set off one fine, early summer afternoon to have a look around and see if might I reexperience the wonderful sense of being immersed in my own people's history that I had felt in Paterson. I was not unfamiliar with the area, for I had rallied for nine years with Joe Doherty's supporters in the park on the site of the old "collect pond" and had, in fact, spent much time in the street outside the dig looking for a sign of Joe in the Metropolitan Correctional Facility opposite it. I particularly remembered one candlelit birthday vigil on a cold December night. It struck me how tied up with the Irish this small area of Manhattan was. Even the name of its central feature, Foley Square, conjured up their image.

To my good fortune, long time friend Lon Bianchi was the chief archeologist on the site. I was hired for my week's vacation and quickly put to work in a privy in the rear of one of the building lots and there I stayed for the better part of the week. Such a "choice" job isn't assigned lightly, for in pre-garbage collection days, people disposed of their household trash in privies and disused cisterns and they are a rich source of artifacts. My particular privy was a round, stone-lined affair (many less "imposing" outhouses on the block were wood-lined), some five feet in diameter, and it was filled with coal cinder and ash, brick and mortar rubble and numerous artifacts. In the July heat, it was cool and commodious.

One could reasonably expect the block's subterranean features to contain many artifacts from the period of Irish occupation such as crockery, clay pipes, pins, brooches, buttons, combs, bottles, tools and, perhaps, mementos of home, which had been discarded or lost and long forgotten. Adding to the incredible population density of these blocks were the tenements (hastily erected at the rear of the narrow lots) that housed the overflow of newly arrived immigrants. Narrow alleyways led to interior courtyards which separated the buildings fronting the street from the tenements within. In the absence of an alley, passageways led through the front building. It was not uncommon for one hundred and fifty people to occupy a single building, in sleeping shifts of eight hours. Indeed, the complex and dense patterns of tenement foundations, alleys, passageways and sanitation features would be the most revealing "artifacts" found on the site.

I gave considerable thought as to how this particular site might reflect the grinding poverty of its inhabitants (the "poor Irish" as my grandma Margaret Neville always referred to us) and the malnutrition, disease, addiction, crime and violence that poverty always engenders. Would we, for example, find evidence of the weaponry that limited police incursions to groups of ten heavily armed men or which engaged the national guard, army and rival gangs in riots and pitched battles? Or might I find something that would indicate continued connections with home, like the many clay pipes found in Paterson with "Home Rule" embossed on the bowl? Would the pottery be second rate or worn and repaired hand-me-downs from



"By 1855 approximately 14,000 Irish, 5,200 Germans, 1,200 English and Scotch, 1,000 Italians and Polish, and 1,500 persons of other nationalities shared the streets and buildings of the ward."

—Carol Groneman Pernicone, "The 'Bloody Ould Sixth': A Social Analysis of a New York City Working-Class Community in the Mid-Nineteenth Century" (Ph.D. University of Rochester, 1973), p. 36.

the "quality"? Would the personal items be shabby and nondescript? Would the bones reflect a poor and unvaried diet? Would we find a disproportionate number of beer, whiskey and opium-based patent medicine bottles?

Mindful of the lurid contemporary descriptions of Dickens and various Victorian missionaries, newspaper accounts of the riots and gang wars and later, the photographs of Jacob Riis, I pondered these questions as I dug. And increasingly, I pondered the nature of the racism and virulently anti-Irish prejudice these people met as they streamed off the "coffin ships" that bore them away from the ravages of "An Gorta Mor, the Great Hunger" and how these attitudes might have influenced the descriptions of the "degraded" men and women of the "Five Points."

*Oh, I am an Irish laborer, hardy, stout and strong,  
Illness I have never had, to our race it don't belong.  
I've still the strength and will to toil, for the wants of life are dear.  
But I'm told when're I ask for work, 'There's no Irish wanted here!'*

—Ned Harrigan

I spoke recently with Jean Howson, one of the principal researchers of the site and, her husband Len, my host at a sugar plantation dig in Montserrat, the Emerald Isle of the Caribbean, two years ago. The significance of the "Five Points" site, which

took five months of intensive work to complete, was that it was the first excavation of an essentially poor people's neighborhood in New York and it has the potential to shed a great deal of light on the beginnings of the tenement life that came to characterize the urban immigrant experience. She pointed out that the neighborhood suffered through four devastating cholera epidemics. The first recorded victim of the second was James Gilligan of #20 Orange (later Baxter) Street, who lay dying in a crowded dirt floor basement dwelling he shared with three other people when the doctor called on Friday, May 11, 1849.

Without an intensive study, only a few "Home Rule" pipes out of an estimated million artifacts recovered from the site are clearly identifiable as Irish. Perhaps of greater significance to our understanding of life in the notorious "Five Points" were the children's dolls and marbles, the shoes and scraps of leather, and the mug with the motto "Temperance and Industry" from one of Father Mathew's campaigns.

In the end, I saw nothing in my short stay to indicate that the people of the "Five Points" were unique in the degree of their poverty or the extent of their alleged ignorance and brutality. I suspect that the majority of the men and women who came to call the "Five Points" home were not unlike most of the people I met in the poorest sections of Belfast—desperately poor and oppressed but decent, generous and well aware of their rich cultural heritage. In America, they had the means as well as the will to rise above their circumstances.