Robert Fitts

The Rhetoric of Reform: The Five Points Missions and the Cult of Domesticity

ABSTRACT

For 150 years, the Five Points has been depicted as New York's center of vice and debauchery. Recent historical and archaeological investigations conclude that while the area contained abysmal sanitary conditions, poverty, and prostitution, many of the oft-told stories of the Five Points' depravity are gross exaggerations. This article examines how literature produced by 19th-century missionaries and moral reformers helped create these myths. Throughout these works, the Five Points symbolized the immorality of urban life and was used to show middle-class readers the importance of their own ideology of domesticity. The reformers exaggerated the area's poverty and stereotyped its inhabitants to illustrate the consequences of not adhering to middle-class principles of respectability and domesticity. By creating a sensational and one-sided image of urban poverty, writers created a stereotype of 19th-century working-class neighborhoods that would survive into the mid-20th century.

Introduction

> The Five Points . . . surrounded by want and suffering, by beggary, shame, and crime. . . . We have been compelled by our relation to this people, to witness little bare feet treading the icy pavements, until the nails have been frozen from their toes; . . . to see boys ripen into criminal manhood, and girls into wanton womanhood . . . (Pease 1856:4).

> When I next entered those dark precincts, I saw with astonishment . . . the old rookeries where thieves, villains, and poor forsaken wretches herded. . . . The scenes that I there witnessed cannot be told by tongue or pen. . . . Every room was a den of infamy. Every species of crime and villainy was planned and executed there. Often at night the cry of murder resounded within those walls, and criminals of the deepest die walked in and out at all hours unmolested. . . . Not a room in all these buildings but had witnessed death in its most frightful and unnatural forms, either by the hand of the assassin, by famine, or by hideous disease. . . . The . . . basements were all rum-holes, all devoted to rapine, violence and lust; all overflowing with depraved and hardened outlaws who would not shrink from any crime. Often four and five families inhabited a room, and many of these took boarders, so that at night the floors were covered. Not a week passed but the Poor-house dead-cart stopped in front, and amid howls and shrieks enough to literally "wake" the dead, some poor creature was carted off to Potter's field (Eells 1856:10-11).

These images of Five Points, contained in a newsletter associated with the area's missionaries, starkly contrast with the archaeological and historical evidence which shows Block 160 to be a complex, vibrant, working-class, immigrant community. Both the archaeological and census data indicate that although the Five Points neighborhood was poor and contained abysmal sanitary conditions, it also housed many stable families and a variety of small businesses. These immigrants, striving to make new homes in America, are rarely present in 19th-century reformers' accounts of the Points. This omission strongly suggests that the accounts do not draw an accurate picture of the area. Written by members of the middle class for a middle-class audience, reformers' descriptions of urban slums actually tell us more about their values than about working-class life (Groneman 1973; Boyer 1978; Stansell 1987; Ward 1989; Mayne 1993). This discussion will examine the writings of the missionaries in Five Points to show how this neighborhood was depicted as the antithesis of the middle-class ideology of domesticity.

The Ideology of Domesticity

The ideology of domesticity, also known as the cult of domesticity, developed out of changing attitudes toward children and the reaction against orthodox Calvinism during the Second Great Awakening (ca. 1800-1830). Throughout the 17th and most of the 18th centuries, American Protestantism was based on the Calvinist doctrines of predestination and human depravity. Basically, these doctrines stated that humans were inherently evil but through the grace of God a select few would be allowed into heaven. God selected these individuals before their birth and earthly accomplishments could not alter a person's fate. Although these doctrines evolved during the 18th century, they still formed the underlying assumptions of most Protestant sects in early 19th-century America. During the

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Second Great Awakening, Calvinist doctrine was transformed to incorporate theological ideas of the enlightenment, which argued that God was rational, kind, and forgiving. As a result, by the 1830s American Protestant religions bore little resemblance to earlier forms of orthodox Calvinism. Instead of the doctrines of predestination and total human depravity, most Protestants came to believe that humans were naturally good and moral creatures who were born into a wicked world. God promised salvation to any human who maintained a moral path and accepted Jesus Christ as the savior. With this radical change, individuals became responsible for their own salvation (Ladies of the Mission 1854; Rosenberg 1971:60-69; Johnson 1978:95-115; McLoughlin 1978:98-140).

This new form of Protestantism viewed children as innocent and close to God as they were untainted by the evils of the world (McLoughlin 1978:116). Preachers argued that this innocence provided the opportunity to teach them the values that would ultimately lead to salvation (Beecher and Stowe 1869:219; Ryan 1981:99). The separation between the work-place and the home and the development of distinctly different gender roles in the 19th century gave middle-class women nearly complete control of child rearing and domestic duties (Ryan 1981; Green 1983; Clark 1986; Mathews 1987; Blumin 1989; Wall 1994). With the very souls of their children in the balance, Protestant mothers began transforming their homes into moral sanctuaries designed to shield their families from the world's evils and instill their children with Christian values. This not only included instructing them with the basic beliefs and traditions of Protestantism, but it also included instruction on how to be "moral," or respectable, members of society. Values taught included honesty, hard work, thriftiness, cleanliness, temperance, courtesy, and various rules of behavior commonly called gentility. To protect their children from ungenteel habits, many mothers banished improper behavior such as cursing, smoking, and drinking from their homes (Beecher and Stowe 1869:84).

The ideology of domesticity transformed 19th-century middle-class homes into highly symbolic zones designed both to influence their inhabitants and make statements to visitors (Clark 1986:114; Kasson 1990:169-170). For example, architectural symbols of a respectable "Christian" home included gothic designs, plants, natural motifs, and the general orderliness of the house and landscape (Green 1983:59; Clark 1986:28; Marsh 1990:11). As the display of these symbols implied acceptance of the cult of domesticity and maintenance of a Christian home, women were judged by the state of their house, and the presence or absence of the appropriate symbols was interpreted as a sign of morality or immorality (Green 1983:59).

Victorian writers were adamant that respectability was not based on birth or wealth but could be learned by anyone who accepted the ideology of domesticity and exhibited appropriate genteel behavior (Kasson 1990:43; Bushman 1992:xv). Individuals who displayed "rude" behavior were seen as degenerates who made no attempt either to improve themselves or create an environment which would lead their children to salvation (Bushman 1992:278). Increasingly, members of the middle class argued that since respectability, and ultimately prosperity, was within the grasp of all Americans, those who remained poor and "rude" could only blame themselves for their lowly position. Poverty was thus seen as a symptom of moral failure (Bushman 1992:424).

Nearly all proponents of the ideology of domesticity argued that rural areas provided the best environment to create a domestic sanctuary. Writers such as Andrew Jackson Downing argued that the proximity to nature was not only healthy, but also its beauty brought one closer to God (Stilgoe 1988:33-37). In contrast, the presence of large numbers of destitute immigrants, mob violence, crime, and disease caused most of the middle class to view urban areas as centers of immorality (Clark 1986:100-102). In the 1840s and 1850s, just as numerous authors were extolling the virtues of domesticity, others created a genre of literature, which exposed the horrors of urban life (Siegel 1981; Mayne 1990). Most of these works were highly formulaic. The author took readers on a tour of a city including the cultural highlights, but undue space was spent on the city's slums and the underworld (Bobo 1852; Robinson 1854; Smith 1868; Foster 1990). The slums and their poverty were described in minute detail, painting a vivid picture for the reader. Recent studies (Siegel 1981; Stansell 1987; Mayne 1990), however,

have shown that the descriptions of the slums and the people who inhabited them are only caricatures, which represent common 19th-century perceptions of poverty. These studies conclude that the entire genre provides little information on the realities of 19th-century working-class life.

Nevertheless, during the mid-19th century, these accounts of urban life were incredibly popular among middle-class readers. Many of these books were reprinted several times and sold over 100,000 copies (Siegel 1981:156, 161; Blumin 1990:38). Although they were ostensibly written to warn wary travelers and newcomers of the dangers of urban life, few were purchased for their advice. Instead, a variety of reasons account for their popularity. First, and foremost, they were highly entertaining. By concentrating on the steamier side of urban life, the books allowed Victorians to voyeuristically experience behavior defined as immoral by the ideology of domesticity and Protestant doctrine.

Second, the descriptions of poverty, and especially poor children, appealed to the many members of the middle class involved in reform movements. As evangelical Protestants believed that salvation was open to anyone who would adopt a "Christian" lifestyle, many believed it was their duty to help others see the light and follow this path (Rosenberg 1971:60-69; Johnson 1978:95-115; McLoughlin 1978:98-140). Alarmed by the rise of urban poverty and violence, many moral reformers concentrated their efforts on the poor. Descriptions of slums, often authored by individuals involved in the moral reform movement, raised public awareness to the plight of the poor and publicized the need for reform. Often included in the accounts were stories about successful missionaries, which showed that poverty could be conquered through the intervention of a spirited middle class. This optimistic message proved to be highly popular. The reform-minded middle class enjoyed reading about the successes and concluded that an end to urban poverty and disorder was an attainable goal (Siegel 1981:155, 167). As a result, the reforming organization received greater support in the form of volunteers and donations.

Thirdly, the sensational accounts contained moral lessons, which upheld the ideology of domesticity. Descriptions of the poor directly linked poverty with immoral behavior. This acted as a warning to those who might forsake proper behavior. To abandon domesticity and gentility was to abandon respectability, prosperity, and happiness. The lesson was extremely popular among the many members of the middle class who built their homes and lives around the concept of respectability.

By creating a sensational image of urban poverty to appeal to the middle class, writers created an image of 19th-century working-class neighborhoods that would survive into the mid-20th century. The books downplayed, or entirely omitted, the strengths and stability of working-class culture, and instead focused on behavior, which contrasted with the ideology of domesticity. As a result, the image of a depraved and dangerous working class became transfixed in the minds of middle-class Victorians and was accepted by many later historians of 19th-century urban American.

Nearly all sensational accounts of life in New York City contained a visit to the Five Points. The literature made this working-class slum legendary as the most depraved and immoral spot in the United States. Among the texts responsible for creating this image of the Five Points were the publications of the area's missions. The newsletters, reports, and books produced by these organizations were given special credence because of the missions' location within the slum and because their altruistic motives and religious conviction seemingly made them above reproach. The images they created thus played an important role in their contemporaries' and even the present day view of life in the Five Points.

The Missions at the Five Points

Two missions, the Five Points Mission and the Five Points House of Industry, directly served the Five Points area. Their location, as well as their gift for self-aggrandizement, made these missions celebrated throughout the northern states. As a result, contemporaries and later historians treated their writings on life in the Five Points as authoritative. As a number of excellent discussions of the origins of both the moral reform movement and the history of the Five Points missions already exist (Rosenberg 1971; Groneman Pernicone 1973; Boyer 1978; Johnson 1978; Walters 1978; Stansell 1987), this

article will only outline the history of the Five Points missions to provide the background for the body of the argument.

In the late-1840s, the New York Ladies' Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church decided that the Five Points area needed a mission to "raise the fallen and to save the lost" (Ladies of the Mission 1854:36). Although initially they could not find a property suitable for their needs, the society opened their mission in a 20 x 40 ft. room at the corner of Little Water and Cross streets in 1850. The society appointed Lewis M. Pease as the lead missionary and immediately embarked on its agenda of reform. Appalled by the prevalence of alcohol in the mostly Irish neighborhood, the missionaries ran temperance meetings and induced a thousand "of the very worst of the inhabitants" to sign a temperance pledge (Ladies of the Mission 1854:39). To abate the area's poverty, it provided the "worthy poor" with clothes, food, and medical care and even helped some inhabitants find work in the garment trade by setting up a workshop (Rosenberg 1971:227-229).

The main focus of the Methodist mission, however, was moral reform. In accordance with Protestant philosophy common in the first half of the 19th century, the mission ladies believed that following the teachings of Jesus Christ, accepting the associated values of domesticity, and keeping a Christian home would lead to a better life. As the Protestant missionaries viewed Catholicism as a doctrine which fostered ignorance and dependence on the so-called "Anti-Christ at Rome," "most . . . assumed that, given a decent exposure to the tenets of reformed Christianity, the Irish might actually welcome proselytization" (Knobel 1986:66, 81). Therefore, the ladies focused on converting the inhabitants of Five Points to Methodism. To achieve this goal, members of the mission distributed religious tracts, preached to individuals receiving aid, conducted prayer meetings, and established a Sunday school for local children. Soon after, a day school was established because "it was found that weekly impressions were too evanescent to be of much benefit to children who, during the other six days, were exposed to influences which ever rest upon those residing there" (Ladies of the Mission 1854:38-39).

This focus on religious conversion led Pease and the mission to part company. Pease became convinced that the lack of adequate employment was the primary cause for many of the Five Pointers' miseries. He argued that once employed the poor would begin to lead a more genteel lifestyle. For Pease, it was poverty and tenement life, which led to moral destruction. Following this philosophy, Pease concentrated on job training programs and job placement instead of preaching about moral reform and looking for converts. In contrast, the mission ladies argued that converting the Five Pointers to Methodism was of paramount importance since in their view the primary cause of unemployment was moral failing and not the lack of opportunity. They believed that once an individual adopted the "Christian" values of hard work, temperance, honesty, and thriftiness, employment and a better life would be forthcoming. These different philosophies led Pease to leave the mission in 1851 and establish his own workshop to concentrate on teaching marketable skills and care for the down-and-out. This enterprise, which will be described in more detail below, became the Five Points House of Industry (Ladies of the Mission 1854:40-41; Barnard 1893:12-13; Rosenberg 1971:228-232).

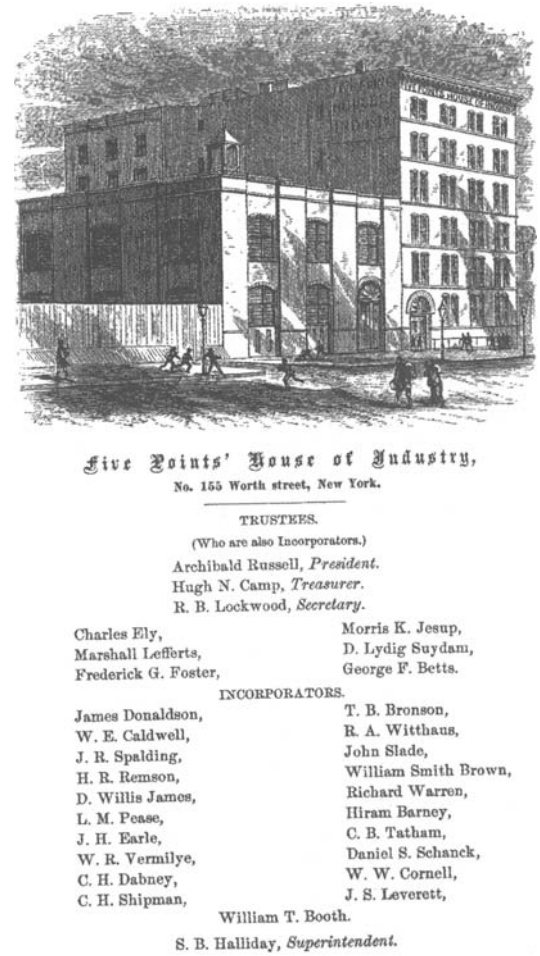
After Pease departed, the Ladies of the Mission appointed Reverend Luckey, previously the chaplain at Sing-Sing prison, to head the mission. The following year (1853), the Ladies purchased and razed the infamous tenement known as the Old Brewery and constructed a new mission on the property (Figure 1). Taking over "the great landmark of vice and degradation" raised the Ladies prominence, and helped them collect donations for their reforms (Ladies of the Mission 1854:64). In the new location, their strategy of reforming both the body and the soul continued. The new mission was centered around a chapel which seated 500 comfortably, but also included a parsonage, a school room, and twenty tenement apartments "in which poor and deserving families [were] . . . provided with very comfortable accommodations at . . . low rent" (Ladies of the Mission 1854:80). Over time, the mission ladies lessened their attempts to convert the overwhelmingly Catholic adult Five Pointers to Methodism and concentrated on providing relief (Rosenberg 1971:240-242). The mission, however, continued to teach Protestant values to the children enrolled in their school (Ladies' Home Missionary Society 1867, 1868).

The Five Points Mission continued to provide relief and religious services to the area into the 1890s.

After leaving the Ladies' mission, Pease quickly turned his workhouse into one of the most successful missions in the United States. Incorporated in 1854 as The Five Points House of Industry, the board established a number of objectives including:

> I. To assist the destitute to support themselves, by providing for them employment, protection, and instruction. . . . II. To provide partial or entire support . . . to children and others incapable of self-support. . . . III. To imbue the objects of its care with the pure principles of Christianity. . . without bias from the distinctive peculiarities of any individual sect (Barnard 1893:23).

The physical location of the House of Industry changed through time. It started in a small "house on the Five Points" and quickly expanded to include eight unconnected houses throughout the neighborhood. In 1856, the first official mission building was completed at 155 Worth Street. In 1864, the House purchased the property known as Cow Bay, demolished the tenement, and built a two-story mission. Five years later, this building was replaced with a five-story structure (Figure 2). This mission survived until it was declared unsafe in 1895. The following year, a new eight-story mission was erected on the same site (Barnard 1893:14-15; Five Points House of Industry 1913:25-26).



Five Points' House of Industry,
No. 155 Worth street, New York.

TRUSTEES.
(Who are also Incorporators.)
Archibald Russell, *President.*
Hugh N. Camp, *Treasurer.*
R. B. Lockwood, *Secretary.*

Charles Ely, Morris K. Jesup,
Marshall Lefferts, D. Lydig Suydam,
Frederick G. Foster, George F. Betts.

INCORPORATORS.

James Donaldson, T. B. Bronson,
W. E. Caldwell, R. A. Witthaus,
J. R. Spalding, John Slade,
H. R. Remson, William Smith Brown,
D. Willis James, Richard Warren,
L. M. Pease, Hiram Barney,
J. H. Earle, C. B. Tatham,
W. R. Vermilye, Daniel S. Schanck,
C. H. Dabney, W. W. Cornell,
C. H. Shipman, J. S. Leverett,
William T. Booth.

S. B. Halliday, *Superintendent.*

Figure 2. The Five Points' House of Industry at 155 Worth Street in the 1860s. (Print in author's collection.)

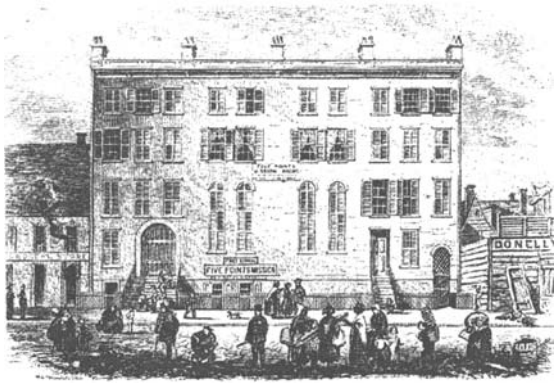


Figure 1. The Five Points Mission House on Park Street in the 1850s and 1860s. (Print in author's collection.)

Although the House of Industry attempted a variety of enterprises, including a farm school, a working woman's home, a free dispensary, and public bathrooms, the boarding house and school for children became the most famous and successful aspect of the mission (Five Points House of Industry 1884:180, 1913:26). In this institution, missionaries taught the poor children of the Five Points job skills, English, and the values treasured by the middle class, including cleanliness, order, self-control, and discipline. William Barnard (1893:36-37), the mission's superintendent for the last three decades of the 19th century, explained:

> We feel that our school has a most potent influence in the matter of drilling these little recruits from sunny Italy into the American ways of decent living and good habits. We commence first on the line of cleanliness, as that is close to Godliness. . . . Besides the education, the habits of neatness and order are inculcated with such effect as to call forth the unsolicited testimony of Missionaries of other Societies. . . .

Pease, and subsequent superintendents of the House of Industry, believed it was their duty to rescue deprived children from the Five Points and place them in rural homes to be raised with proper values. This often meant permanently separating the children from their natural (and usually Catholic) parents and sending them to a Protestant family in the country. There, they would be "contented and happy, and . . . educated for a life of respectability and usefulness" (Five Points House of Industry 1855:17). When placements were successful, Protestant families often formally adopted the children and raised them as their own. Some Catholic parents resisted the missionaries' efforts. At least once, a Catholic mother appealed to a magistrate to order Pease to return her child (*Five Points Monthly/Message* 1857b:97). Barnard's (1893:16) history of the House of Industry relates how the Five Pointers reacted to Pease: "religious bigotry asserted itself to harass at every step, and even judicial authority endeavored to hinder. More than once was he subjected to personal assault and stones were hurled at him on the street." Nevertheless, Pease and the missionaries prevailed. By the early 1890s, Barnard (1893:75) boasted that between the two Five Points missions "sixty thousand children have been rescued . . . from the streets and had their feet set in the better way."

In 1909 a diphtheria epidemic hit the city and the missionaries started to seriously consider moving their home to the countryside. The following year, the children were moved to temporary quarters in the country until the Children's Village in Rockland County, New York, was finished in 1911. At the same time, the mission's headquarters moved to 442 West 23rd Street (Five Points House of Industry 1913:26-27).

The Sources

To identify how the Five Points missionaries helped create and perpetuate the image of the district as a vicious slum, the newsletters, reports, and book-length publications of the Five Points Mission and the House of Industry were examined.

The Mission Ladies produced three publications, the most important of which was a three-hundred page book entitled *The Old Brewery and the Mission House at the Five Points* (Ladies of the Mission 1854). This book, published in 1854, describes the first three years of the mission's existence and contains many vignettes of the missionaries' interactions with poor Five Pointers. As this volume was produced partly to raise contributions for the mission, the book emphasizes the missionaries' success reforming the Five Pointers' morals and converting them to Methodism. To make this transformation more spectacular, the book over-emphasizes the area's poverty and crime. While thus not a good source for studying working-class life at the Five Points, the volume is an excellent source for examining how the myth of debauchery was perpetuated.

Descriptions of the poor are also found in the mission's monthly publication, *The Monthly Echo of the Original Five Points Mission* (1874-1898). This newsletter, first published on 1 January 1861 and continuing at least until 1 June 1898, contained articles promoting temperance, news about the mission, extracts from letters received by the mission, stories with Christian morals, and word games. For this study, the issues available at the New York Public Library, dating between 1 August 1874, and 1 June 1898, were examined. Finally, the *Annual Reports of the New York Ladies' Home Missionary Society* at Five Points were examined. These reports are devoted mainly to information on the organization, such as lists of officers and donors, financial reports, and newsworthy events, but occasionally they provide insight into the mission's relationship with the neighborhood. For this analysis, the annual reports from 1867 to 1895, available at the New York Public Library, were surveyed.

The Five Points House of Industry also produced three publications: a book, a monthly newsletter, and an annual report. In 1893 William Barnard, the house's superintendent, published *Forty Years at the Five Points*, the only book on the House of Industry. This history and description of the contemporary institution emphasizes the House of Industry's role in

transforming the Five Points from the infamous "den of iniquity" to a less dangerous slum. As attitudes toward the poor had changed between the publication of the Mission Ladies' book in 1854 and Barnard's book in 1893, the later work contains fewer stereotyped images of the Five Points slum. The book does provide details on the history of reform in the area and a few stereotypes of New York's later immigrants such as Italians and Chinese.

Starting in August 1857, the institution also produced the *Monthly Record of the Five Points House of Industry*. For this paper, all the issues available at the New York Public Library (Five Points House of Industry 1858-1909) were examined. In general, these are factual reports containing descriptions of the House of Industry's activities, programs, and construction projects. They contain few descriptions of the Five Points area. *The Annual Report of the Trustees of the Five Points House of Industry* was first published in 1855 (Five Points House of Industry 1855) and continued publication into the early-20th century. For this study, the copies available at the New York Public Library (1855, 1884-1913) were examined. Although the 1855 reports contain moralistic vignettes depicting slum life, the later reports are basically factual. They describe the institution's organization and physical plant, list its officers, and provide statistical information on its inmates and on the diseases treated in the infirmary.

A fourth publication called the *Five Points Monthly* (1856-1857) between January 1856 and April 1857, and thereafter *The Message* (1857-1858), was not officially associated with the House of Industry but nevertheless contained articles about its work. Reverend Pease was a regular author in 1856 and issues contained the *Monthly Record of the House of Industry* in the fall of 1857 and the House's annual report in the June 1858 issue. The publication included a variety of moralistic stories, descriptions of the Five Points slum, and editorials on methods of urban reform. The New York Public Library holds issues from January 1856 through June 1858, and each of these issues was examined for this study.

The Five Points Described

> The "Five Points!"–a name which has hitherto been banished from the vocabulary of the refined and sensitive, or whispered with a blush, because of its painful and degrading associations. The "Five Points!" What does that name import? It is the synonym for ignorance the most entire, for misery the most abject, for crime of the darkest dye, for degradation so deep that human nature cannot sink below it. We hear it and visions of sorrow–of irremediable misery–flit before our mental vision. Infancy and childhood, without a mother's care or a father's protection: born in sin, nurtured in crime; the young mind sullied in its first bloom, the young heart crushed before its tiny call for affection has met one answering response. Girlhood is there; not ingenuous, blushing, confiding youth, but reckless, hardened, shameless effrontery from which the spectator turns away to weep. Woman is there; but she has forgotten how to blush, and she creates oblivion of her innocent children's home, and of the home of riper years, with its associations of fond parental love and paternal sympathies, by the incessant use of ardent spirits. Men are there whose only occupation is thieving. . . . And boys are there by scores, so fearfully mature in all that is vicious and degrading, that soon, O how soon, they will be fit only for the prison and the gallows (Ladies of the Mission 1854:34-35).

The above quote typifies how reformers depicted the Five Points. It was upheld as the antithesis of middle-class respectability and domesticity, a symbol for the misery that could occur if the ideologies of gentility and domesticity were not followed. An 1857 article in favor of tenement reform, published in *The Five Points Monthly/The Message* (1857a:7), begins:

> Every building is characteristic of its builder–nothing more so–and no less does every dwelling fit itself or find a characteristic inhabitant. . . . A lair, a den, a hole in the mud or in the sand or in the rock, satisfy the instincts of some creatures [i.e. the immoral]. Others require a warm nest for the comfort of their young [i.e. the followers of domesticity]. A cleanly, an orderly, and even beautifully designed habitation, is characteristic of a still higher rank, and repays as much as it owes, to their delicate organization."

It is not surprising, therefore, that the reformers' descriptions of dwellings in the Five Points usually include words such as filth, slovenliness, dark, disorder, misery, and decay (Ladies of the Mission 1854:48, 104, 147-148; 263-264; Five Points House of Industry 1855; Eells 1856:41; Pease 1856:23-24). By using these adjectives to describe the homes of Five Pointers, the reformers implied that their inhabitants were lazy and immoral. For example, one missionary explained:

> he said I would find the house very dirty; but no anticipation could equal the sad reality. The entry

> through which I was obliged to pick my steps led to the door of a room, the air of which was almost intolerable, so offensive was the odor on opening the door. It was on the ground floor, and the crevices and holes of the broken flooring were a receptacle for the refuse food and slops" (Ladies of the Mission 1854:120).

According to the middle-class ideology of domesticity, a proper home should not only be clean and orderly but also contain the symbols of gentility and nurturing. Items such as plants and flowers, matching tablewares, carpets, parlor furniture, pictures, and clocks were a must in middle-class homes (Green 1983:37; Williams 1985:76-78; Kasson 1990:174; Bushman 1992:265; Fitts and Yamin 1996). To show the misery and debauchery of the Five Points, descriptions of tenement interiors usually stress the lack of genteel material culture. Rooms are empty, except for a broken table or chair and a pile of rags in the corner, while tablewares are chipped, broken, or even non-existent (Ladies of the Mission 1854:48-49; Eells 1856:112; Pease 1856:24). For example, the Ladies of the Mission (1854:48-49) reprinted the following account of a visit to the Old Brewery:

> when our company entered; women lay on a mass of filthy, unsightly rags in the corner– . . . an old table covered with a few broken dishes; two women were peeling potatoes, and actually pulling off the skins with their finger nails; the smoke and stench of the room was so suffocating that it could not be long endured. . . . On the front side of the building . . . sat two women, who looked as low and debased as any human beings could. No furniture was in the room, with only the floor for their bed. . . .

The illustration, *The Home of the Astor House Beggar*, included within the Mission Ladies' book, *The Old Brewery*, provides an excellent example of a "depraved" home (Figure 3). The picture shows the middle-class missionary viewing the squalid and immoral conditions of her student's home. Both parents, dressed in ragged clothes, are drunk. The father slumps on a chest, while the mother is passed out on the floor. The scene emphasizes filth and disorder. Empty bottles, pipes, trash, and a turned-over stool lie on the floor, showing that the parents are too lazy and savage to tidy the dwelling. The liquor bottles and the pipes are symbolically important. The missionaries actively campaigned against drinking and tobacco smoking, two behaviors strongly associated with the working class (Walters 1978; Cook 1989). The presence of these items both emphasizes the inhabitants' class and their rejection of the missionaries' pleas to abandon "immoral" behavior. They also act as a reminder to middle-class viewers that these habits can lead to utter debauchery. Although the viewer cannot see the entire room, the scene implies that the family lacks the basic furniture and material culture associated with civilization. There are no beds, no tables, no proper chairs, pictures, or plants. As the book contains few illustrations, this image of degradation and immorality is all the more powerful. The picture warns readers that the lack of a proper genteel home can only lead to immorality.

In both the written and drawn images, the lack of material culture was used to emphasize the debauchery and savagery of the Points' inhabitants. In the mid-19th century, middle-class writers went to great lengths to specify the

Figure 3. Illustration of the "Astor House Beggar" featured in the Ladies of the Mission's (1854) book, *The Old Brewery*.

differences between "civilized" peoples and "savages" (Williams 1985:20-21). Etiquette, housing, and appropriate material culture were among the many characteristics cited to differentiate between the two groups. As many writers argued that the defining features of respectability could be adopted by anyone regardless of wealth, the lack of these features was interpreted as laziness and indifference to Christian morality (Bushman 1992:423-424). By stressing their absence, the writers were portraying the inhabitants as uncivilized degenerates, an image that was quickly accepted by their middle-class readers.

The archaeology of Block 160, however, shows that these depictions of the Five Points were probably gross exaggerations. The evidence suggests that some, if not many, inhabitants of Five Points owned an extensive variety of goods, including many of the items used by the middle class as symbols of respectability. For example, matching sets of Gothic-shaped ceramics, porcelain tea sets, and Staffordshire figurines were recovered in the 1991 excavations. The dichotomy between the reformers' images and the recovered artifacts emphasizes how the literature does not accurately represent life in the Five Points, but instead uses caricatures and exaggerations to hammer home the importance of domesticity.

As the missionaries went to the Five Points to teach Protestant morals and middle-class behavior, they found actions that did not conform to these standards as objectionable and immoral. As a result, the reformers' literature portrays a variety of behaviors practiced by Irish immigrants, or the working class in general, as acts of debauchery. From the early-19th century, evangelical Protestants spear-headed the temperance movement. Many Protestants, including the influential preacher Lyman Beecher, argued that moral Christians should avoid alcohol entirely (Walters 1978:125-126). Drunkenness, and especially intemperance, were viewed as moral failings that could lead to a life of sin. Many members of the middle class followed this advice and by mid-century alcohol consumption had dropped dramatically (Walters 1978:137). In contrast, alcohol consumption was an important part of working-class and immigrant life (Stott 1990:217-222). Socializing at taverns and drinking at wakes was a part of daily life in the Five Points. For example, Mr. B., an educated Irish immigrant living in the Five Points, found that "his occupation, . . . canvassing the city with books, brought him into daily contact with friends from the old country, with whom he was induced to take a social glass" (Ladies of the Mission 1854:206). This working-class immigrant pattern of drinking helped support many drinking establishments at Five Points. From 1851 to 1854, there were at least 59 porterhouses, bars, and liquor stores in the four blocks bordering the Points (Doggett 1851-1852; Rode 1853-1854).

Shocked by the preponderance of drinking establishments and the open consumption of alcohol, reformers concluded that intemperance was the major cause of poverty at the Five Points (Ladies of the Mission 1854:39, 58). As a result, most of the descriptions of the Points emphasize intemperance and the evils of alcohol. For example, a reformer wrote:

> "There goes a poor drunken woman: how she howls and raves. . . . Oh, what a frightful wretch!–features bloated and horribly distorted: her matted and tangled hair hanging loosely around her shoulders; her clothes, a mere garment or two, torn into strips, scarcely cleaving to each other and to her form!" (Eells 1856:113).

Through countless similar descriptions, readers are given the impression that the entire neighborhood consisted of drunks. Furthermore, in nearly all of their stories, the reformers explicitly linked intemperance, and even casual alcohol consumption, with moral failing. The descriptions of intemperance at the Five Points were a powerful message to middle-class readers. Stories of formerly respectable families forced into poverty by the father's drinking were used to convince genteel families that even casual drinking could lead to disaster.

Intemperance was only one of many behaviors reformers found immoral. Open displays of sexuality were also considered highly objectionable. As the ideology of domesticity transformed middle-class homes into moral sanctuaries, Victorian attitudes towards sex changed. Some contemporary writers argued that these sanctuaries should not be defiled by lust and impure behaviors; therefore they strongly urged that sex should only be used for procreation. At the same time, the ideology of domesticity stressed women's higher morality and purity. As a result, women were said to lack sexual passion.

Writers implored men to follow their wives' moral behavior and "keep their sexual appetites under tight control" (Mathews 1987:29). The consequence was a decline in the middle-class birth rate, and the priggish sexuality we now associate with the Victorian era (Ryan 1981:156-157; Mathews 1987:27-29).

Gender relations among the immigrants in Five Points followed a different pattern. Men and women were more free with displays of public affection, and women openly flirted and dressed "immodestly" (Foster 1990:175-176). Furthermore, overcrowded tenements provided few opportunities for privacy. Many people sometimes shared a single room, making personal grooming, courtships, and even sexual relations visible to neighbors. The missionaries seized upon these differences and incorporated them into their image of the Points.

Reformers stressed that open sexuality created an unhealthy environment for raising moral children. Although the literature is vague on sexuality, a recurring image of debauchery depicts unrelated men, women, and children packed into the same sleeping quarters. For example, a missionary wrote:

> One need not go many blocks from here [the House of Industry] to find men, women, and children living in perfect holes, in the most abject poverty, and consequently misery, where, added to the lack of necessary means of support, are habits of vice. . . . In these holes are gathered promiscuously both sexes, often eating, drinking, sleeping and carousing together (Barnard 1893:70).

At a time when "respectable" people had individual and private bedchambers (Clark 1986;12-16, 40-42), the sharing of rooms, a common 17th and early-18th century practice (Deetz 1977), was thought to be immoral. Reformers worried that the close quarters would lead to premarital sex, incest, or that children would observe sexual activity leading them to vice and immorality.

Surprisingly, the reformers' works contain few discussions or open references to prostitution, even though contemporary accounts (Foster 1990) and modern scholarly works (Gilfoyle 1992; Hill 1993) indicate that the trade was openly practiced at Five Points. Indeed, during the 1991 archaeological excavations, artifacts associated with a brothel active in the 1840s at 12 Orange Street were recovered. The reformers' writings contain veiled references to prostitutes as "wanton women," but prostitutes are rarely characters in their literature. Their absence is surprising because they would have been good symbols of the area's debauchery. Perhaps prostitution was glossed over because the Victorian missionaries and middle-class readers viewed it as an indelicate subject; however, definite reasons for the invisibility of prostitution in these works may never be determined.

The belief that children should be raised in a moral sanctuary extended beyond the home to the surrounding neighborhood. In the mid-19th century, as a result of this and other factors, middle-class Americans began to flee urban areas and establish homes in the suburbs (Spann 1981:108-109; Jackson 1985:25-33). During this period, writers constantly berated city life and created an image which emphasized urban filth, debauchery, and crime. For many New York writers, the Five Points was used as a symbol for the problems of urban America. Following this genre, the reformers exaggerated aspects of life in the Points to show the area's immorality. Two images, which transcend the home and were used to show the immorality of the area, were crime, and inter-racial interaction and miscegenation.

The reformers' literature on the Five Points abounds with images and references to crime. "Button up your pockets, look out for your handkerchief–thieves and villains are all around you. The jingling of your money or the sight of your gold watch may cost you your life–human life is cheap up the alley, for it is on the Five Points . . ." (Eells 1856:41). Like many of the references to crime, this one focuses on murder. The reformers' literature and the penny press maintained that in the Five Points murder "belong[ed] to the order of day and night" (Ladies of the Mission 1854:45). Yet, this frightening claim was clearly an exaggeration. In the 1840s and 1850s, Manhattan's yearly murder rate was 2.5 per 100,000 inhabitants, or approximately 10 per year (Kantrowitz 1995:923; Snyder 1995:297-298). Even allowing for the under-reporting of crimes among the poor, it is obvious that the reformers' references to murder is more of a literary device designed to emphasize the horrors of the slum than an accurate description of crime.

More common than references to murder are stories of robbery in the Five Points. Indeed,

nearly every negative description of the neighborhood mentions the preponderance of thieves and particularly dismal dwellings, such as the Old Brewery, are usually called a "den of thieves." Supposedly swindlers were also commonplace. Unlike the penny press writers, reformers rarely discuss the confidence men and their frauds; however, they occasionally give examples of dishonest beggars. A description of the House of Industry's neighbors published in the August 1856 issue of the *Five Points Monthly* states:

> that laughing, frolicking company of Italian beggars . . . are seated around a huge dish of macaroni and feasting luxuriously. The blind beggar has opened his eyes; the crippled beggar who walks on crutches has thrown them aside; the paralytic who crawls on his hands and knees, now stands upright; the heart-broken woman who sits all day long on the steps of St. Paul's Churchyard, with her poor helpless child, born without arms–her face is now full of smiles, while the child, borrowed as it is, is sleeping on that pile of rags in the corner, almost exhausted by the cruelty of this heartless woman, who had lashed her arms behind her all day (Eells 1856:112).

Vague references to violence are common in the reformers' writings. For example, the Ladies of the Mission (1854:33) describe inhabitants of the Points as "brutal men with black eyes and disfigured faces, proclaiming drunken brawls and fearful violence." A study of the police blotters in *The New York Transcript* (1834a, 1834b) for June and August of 1834 suggests that robberies, burglaries, and prostitution were rampant at the Five Points. From 23 June to 12 August 1834, at least 20 crimes were reported in the police blotters. These included seven thefts, four robberies, two references to prostitution, two assaults, two fights, one account of disorderly conduct, one combined robbery and stabbing, and one full-scale riot. It is therefore surprising that the gang brawls so enthusiastically described in the penny press, and confirmed in recent historical works (Gilje 1987:260-264; Stott 1990:230, 243) are absent from the reformers' literature. Also missing are discussions of riots and mob behavior, even though riots and small violent disturbances occurred in the area throughout the early to mid-19th century (Brown 1976; Gilje 1987:240; Bernstein 1990). The reasons for these omissions are unknown; however, missionaries needed to walk a fine line between creating an image of immorality and showing that their reforming efforts were not misplaced. Perhaps references to riots, which the middle class viewed with outright fear, would have reduced charitable donations.

In keeping with the open racism common in mid-19th-century America, the reformers' literature used examples of inter-racial interaction and especially miscegenation to depict the Five Points as morally debased. In most descriptions, blacks are described as violent and dirty (Ladies of the Mission 1854:198-202). For example, the following passage is from a 1856 issue of *The Five Points Monthly*.

> Let us enter. Bah!–what nauseating reek, what piles of filth. As we pass on, a dozen Negroes squeeze past us–don't mind them, they are only chimney sweeps. Here we are at the door of the Old White Woman, who lives among the Negroes. . . . Beside the fire is a large black man, with his face tied up with a cotton bandanna. He is cross and not disposed to be communicative. Speak kindly to him, there is murder in his heart. . . . In a corner sits a female monster, a counterpart of the man (Eells 1856:41).

An aspect of race relations especially feared by middle-class white Americans was miscegenation. Since the mid-17th century, whites feared that blurring the distinction between black and white would erode the ideologies which upheld slavery. By the mid-19th century, these ideologies were so firmly in place that even after slavery, many whites believed that sexual relations with African-Americans would "pollute the white race" and lead to immorality (Bennet 1993:297-325). As women were believed to be morally superior and purer than men, relations between white women and black men were seen as especially debaucherous. It is probably no coincidence that passages portraying miscegenation found in the reformers' literature depict white women with black men. These same passages often imply that the relationship has robbed the women of all her decency and doomed their children to immorality. For example, in August 1856, *The Five Points Monthly* included this description of the neighborhood.

> Over neighbor Crown's store live Italians and Negroes in great numbers. I see there a picture, framed by the empty easing of a window. The black and woolly head of a Negro lies in the lap of a white woman:

> four children, of an amalgam of base metals, lie about the floor in a state of nature, flourishing their heels to the edification of a half-starved dog and a cat with her ears cut off and her tail singed to the bone, both of which sit apparently looking on with a listless interest, at the antics of their more vicious companions, younger in miserable experience, but fated to a worse experience in the end (Eells 1856:112).

Although the reformers' literature stresses the presence of African-Americans to show the dangers of the Five Points, the 1855 New York State Census shows that few blacks actually inhabited the area. Only 332 African-Americans (represented in the census as Negroes or Mulattos) were listed as living in blocks surrounding the Five Points (election districts three and five). Indeed, for the entire Sixth Ward only 573 individuals out of a population of 25,562, or 2%, are listed as black (New York State Census 1855; Ernst 1949:191). Although African-Americans were habitually undercounted in 19th-century censuses (Swan 1989), the statistics suggest that reformers over-represented the presence of African-Americans and miscegenation in their accounts to create a particular image of the Points rather than accurately portraying life in the area.

As the above analysis shows, the reformers' literature used exaggerated images of the Five Points to send specific messages to their middle-class readers. Descriptions of squalid living conditions, drinking, open sexuality, crime, and miscegenation, as well as other images not discussed here, show how not following the ideology of domesticity led to an immoral life of misery. This message warned readers to defend their respectability by creating moral sanctuaries to protect their families from the world's evils symbolized by the Five Points. Furthermore, the stories showed how immoral behavior could lead to ruin and thus acted as reminders for readers to follow evangelical Protestant values of orderliness, temperance, and control of bodily appetites. Not all characters in the missionaries' descriptions of the Five Points, however, rejected the ideology of domesticity. The missionaries classified the Five Pointers into two categories: the depraved poor, who made no effort to create the proper domestic environment, and the worthy poor, moral people who strove for respectability but were unlucky. The worthy poor appear in the literature for two reasons. First, they highlight the progress of the missionaries' reforms. Second, they show that anyone can become respectable and rise above poverty if they choose a moral life and internalize the ideology of domesticity.

The Worthy Poor

The missionaries recognized "there are those living in the Five Points who have once known and seen better days; that many hundreds are virtuously poor, and that they are alive to kindness, and most grateful for our attentions to them and their children" (Ladies of the Mission 1854:146). In the missionaries' writings, these individuals tended to be Protestants who led a moral life, but whose ignorance of the finer points of gentility prevented them from bettering their position. Through home visits, missionaries identified these people and expounded the canons of domesticity. "These people, in many instances, only want some one to tell them what to do. They need to be instructed in the very first steps toward making their conditions better; and we generally find them very teachable" (Ladies of the Mission 1854:151).

Missionary writings abound with stories of virtuous poor rescued from poverty through proper instruction. Yet, throughout the reformers' works the worthy poor are stereotyped. As Alan Mayne (1990) found in his analysis of the slums of Sydney, Australia, the characters do not reflect real people as much as perceptions of a type of city dweller. The moral character of the worthy poor mirrors the values stressed in post-Awakening Protestantism: honesty, industry, and temperance. Not surprisingly, the worthy poor are often Protestants or convert during the course of the story (Ladies of the Mission 1854:191-194, 223-239, 239). In a typical tale, the Ladies of the Mission (1854:123) described a sympathetic character as "a strictly honest, sober man." These adjectives were used to characterize nearly every member of the worthy poor introduced to the reader. Despite their poverty, the individuals are clean and sometimes bear "the marks of respectability" (Ladies of the Mission 1854:239). They dress neatly but their clothing is old, worn, and occasionally patched.

The worthy poor's homes contrast with the more usual descriptions of the Five Points' squalid conditions. Despite their poverty and

location in the Five Points, the worthy poor created homes that followed the ideology of domesticity. Their homes are characterized as simple, but clean and orderly, with touches of ornamentation such as plants, flowers, and pictures (Ladies of the Mission 1854:74-75, 122). For example, in the March, 1856, issue of the *Five Points Monthly*, a missionary described the home of a respectable, but poor, black family.

> The room is as cozy as one could wish to see. The table is spread for dinner–not with a loaf of bread and a huge knife lying alongside of a piece of soap, or a tallow candle, as we generally see it in the abodes of foreigners–not so is the table spread–but it is adorned with various-colored crockery, some blue, some pink, some white. One plate in particular we notice, which probably is appropriated to baby's use. It represents the "selling of Joseph into Egypt." On the walls are hung several brightly-colored prints, all illustrative of Scripture subjects. No pictures of the Virgin Mary, no crucifixes here, to distress our Protestant sensibilities (L.E.C. 1856:46-47).

Figure 4. Illustration of the "Dying Mother" featured in the Ladies of the Mission's (1854) book, *The Old Brewery*.

The material symbols of respectability, the table, tableware, pictures, and the plate depicting an Old Testament story, show that this family has created a suitable home to raise moral children. These symbols would have been instantly recognized as such by middle-class readers; the effect is to make readers feel sympathy for the family and admire their desire to better their condition.

Similar feelings were probably aroused by the illustration, *The Dying Mother*, found in *The Old Brewery* (Ladies of the Mission 1854:131). This picture (Figure 4) depicts the bed-ridden dying mother surrounded by her family and a middle-class missionary. Despite the crucifix on the wall, the room's material culture symbolizes a respectable but poor family following the ideology of domesticity. The mother lies in a solid bed, made for a single person, that is covered by an attractive quilt (perhaps symbolizing the home industry and mastery of crafts stressed by writers on domestic life). Behind her is another piece of furniture with framed pictures, or mirrors, and several unidentifiable items placed on top. Notice that the frames are arranged neatly and symmetrically emphasizing orderliness. Above the center frame is a branch, probably from a willow. The bent willow branch, seen on countless 19th-century gravestones, symbolizes the mother's death, but as a plant it is also a middle-class symbol of domesticity and a mother's nurturing of her children. In the foreground, a turned-over child's bench, a garment, and a pull-toy lie in a heap on the floor. As the material culture of childhood, these items suggest that the family has adopted the middle-class attitudes toward childhood that stress nurturing, learning, and play instead of viewing children as extra workers. Yet, their disorderly position on the floor is more complex. It could suggest the children's grief, which caused them to discard their toys is such a manner, or the disorder may emphasize that the family aspires to respectability but has not yet achieved it. Both, and other interpretations, are possible. Finally, all family members are dressed modestly but neatly. The girl in the center even has a bow on her dress and matching decorated stockings. As dress was an important marker of social class and gentility, this once again shows how the family strove for respectability. Although the picture itself contains numerous symbols of domesticity, the most powerful statement is made when it is contrasted with *The Home of the Astor House*

Beggar, described above. As there are only six illustrations in the *Old Brewery*, the contrast between the two pictures is inescapable. Undoubtedly, this contrast helped reinforce the relationship between immorality and poverty, and domesticity and respectability.

Even through descriptions of the Five Points rarely include the worthy poor, they are important characters in missionary works because they lead readers to several conclusions. First, they demonstrate that the missions are helping deserving families escape from poverty and become respectable members of the community. This helps justify the missions' existence and raise charitable donations. If the missionaries only focused on the stereotyped depravity of the Five Points, many benefactors would have viewed the situation as hopeless and withdrawn their financial support.

Second, the stories show the importance of domesticity and leading a moral life. Most stories of the worthy poor have the same happy ending. A family member finally finds employment and through hard work, thrift, and temperance becomes successful. The family moves from Five Points to a more respectable neighborhood and lives contentedly. This tale upholds the middle-class ideology of domesticity by showing readers that success is open to all Americans who can follow a moral and respectable lifestyle.

The third conclusion grows out of the second. If poor inhabitants of Five Points could become respectable and prosperous by adopting the canons of domesticity, then anyone could do the same. Poverty thus stemmed not solely from economic opportunity, but from laziness and other moral failings. As a result, these vignettes of the worthy poor helped perpetuate the belief that the poor were the primary cause of their own poverty.

Despite their importance as symbols in the reformers' literature, the worthy poor did not figure prominently in the popular perception of the Five Points. Instead, the image depicts Five Pointers as drunk, depraved, and violent immigrants who embody all that is wrong with American urban life.

Conclusion

The reformers' literature paints a vivid picture of the Five Points: immoral immigrants inhabiting filthy dilapidated tenements devoid of household goods, while drunkenness and debauchery abound. Yet, comparing these images with the archaeological and documentary evidence suggests that the reformers grossly exaggerated the poverty at the Points. Instead, the descriptions tell us more about middle-class values. Throughout the reformers' works, the Five Points symbolized the immorality of urban life and was used to show middle-class readers the importance of their own ideology of domesticity. To use the Five Points as the antithesis of middle-class domesticity, the reformers exaggerated the area's poverty and stereotyped its inhabitants.

The idealized descriptions of the poor were not limited to the Five Points. Across the globe, middle-class observers depicted poor working-class areas as dangerous slums. Indeed, the descriptions of the slums of New York, San Francisco, Birmingham, England, and the Rocks of Sydney, Australia, are surprisingly similar (Mayne 1993; Karskens 1994:48-49). Buildings are described as dark and decaying, their inhabitants as drunken and animal-like, and all are surrounded by intolerable stench. Alan Mayne (1993) has found that in each case the descriptions are mere stereotypes and are not accurate descriptions of the places or their inhabitants. Instead, these images reflect middle-class perceptions of poverty.

Throughout the modernizing world, industrialization widened the economic gap between workers and white collar employees, resulting in urban enclaves of poor living in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions (Homberger 1994:16-25). Accompanying these conditions were increases in disease, crime, and civil unrest in cities across the globe. This widespread misery directly challenged the bourgeois belief in an orderly just world. In response, middle-class writers created a body of literature explaining the causes of poverty. The vast majority linked poverty with immoral behavior by focusing on alcohol use and prostitution, or blamed specific ethnic groups such as the Irish, Chinese, or Africans for social ills (Solomon 1956; Knobel 1986; Mayne 1993). To capture their audiences' imaginations and make their point, these writers relied upon stereotyped images of poverty. "Stereotypes are inherently bipolar and reductive, visualizing clear and absolute borders between normalcy and difference. They function thereby to externalize society's anxieties by projecting

the sources of those anxieties on to villainous other-siders" (Mayne 1993:10).

With this simplistic explanation for poverty, middle-class reformers throughout the world believed that poverty was only a stage that could be conquered by educating the poor with the ideology of domesticity and proper moral behavior (Mayne 1993:137). Numerous benevolent associations were formed to teach the poor gentility, temperance, and other middle-class values in an effort to free them from poverty (Boyer 1978). Yet, despite the reformers' fervent efforts, instead of being abated, poverty grew. It was only after decades of unsuccessful attempts to attack poverty through gentrifying the working class that reformers accepted the economic causes of poverty. No longer blinded by their zealous, but well-meaning, insistence that moral reform would cure poverty, steps toward actually improving living and working conditions were taken in the closing decades of the 19th century.

As a result of these biases and agendas, the reformers' writings should be considered poor sources on working-class life at the Five Points. Nevertheless, the popularity and wide-circulation of these descriptions led the general public to fixate on the images of depravity, forgetting the subtleties of life in the Five Points. In the 20th century, this one-sided simplistic depiction of the Five Points as a gang infested hell-hole was perpetuated in a number of influential historical works and novels. Perhaps the most influential is Herbert Asbury's *The Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld* first published in 1927. This highly readable history, which relies on contemporary newspaper, urban tour, and reformers' accounts, uncritically repeats most of the myths concerning the Five Points. For example, in a four page description of the Old Brewery, readers are told the building contained over 1,000 people and "swarmed with thieves, murderers, pickpockets, beggars, harlots, and degenerates of every type" (Asbury 1990:15). In an attempt to depict the Old Brewery as the height of depravity, Asbury (1990:14-15) continues the century-old strategy of emphasizing miscegenation, and claims that "for almost fifteen years the Old Brewery averaged a murder a night." Asbury's book proved to be extremely popular and has been commonly quoted by journalists and historians as an authority on life in the Five Points.

More recently, Luc Sante's 1992 *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York* repeats many of the myths. Sante (1992:26-29) carefully added caveats such as "the unverifiable legends would have it," and seems cognizant of the symbolic nature of the missionaries' descriptions even though he repeats sensationalized accounts of the Points without criticizing them. This leads to a highly readable book, but the descriptions perpetuate the one-sided view that the Five Points was only a slum filled with depraved and drunken criminals. More scholarly histories also rely on the stereotyped reformer and penny press accounts and miss the complexities of life at the Five Points. For example, Lloyd Morris in *Incredible New York*, first published in 1951, repeats many of the unsubstantiated myths, and emphasizes the area's crime, gangs, pawnbrokers, prostitutes, intemperance, and poverty without referring to the thousands of hard-working immigrant families who lived at the Points. A number of scholarly histories offer a more balanced interpretation of the Five Points neighborhood by examining the lives of these immigrants (Groneman Pernicone 1973; Spann 1981; Stansell 1987; Ernst 1949; Yamin 1997). Yet, popular histories, tour books, walking tours, and novels which inundate the public with exaggerated stories of crime and depravity keep the old myths alive and well (Dunshee 1952; Carr 1994; Wolfe 1994).

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ROBERT FITTS
GOTHAM ARCHAEOLOGY, LLC
200 EAST END AVE NO. 2M
NEW YORK, NY 10128