

The Bloody Ould Sixth Ward:  
Crime and Society in Five Points, New York

Research Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for graduation  
“with Research Distinction in History” in the undergraduate colleges of  
The Ohio State University

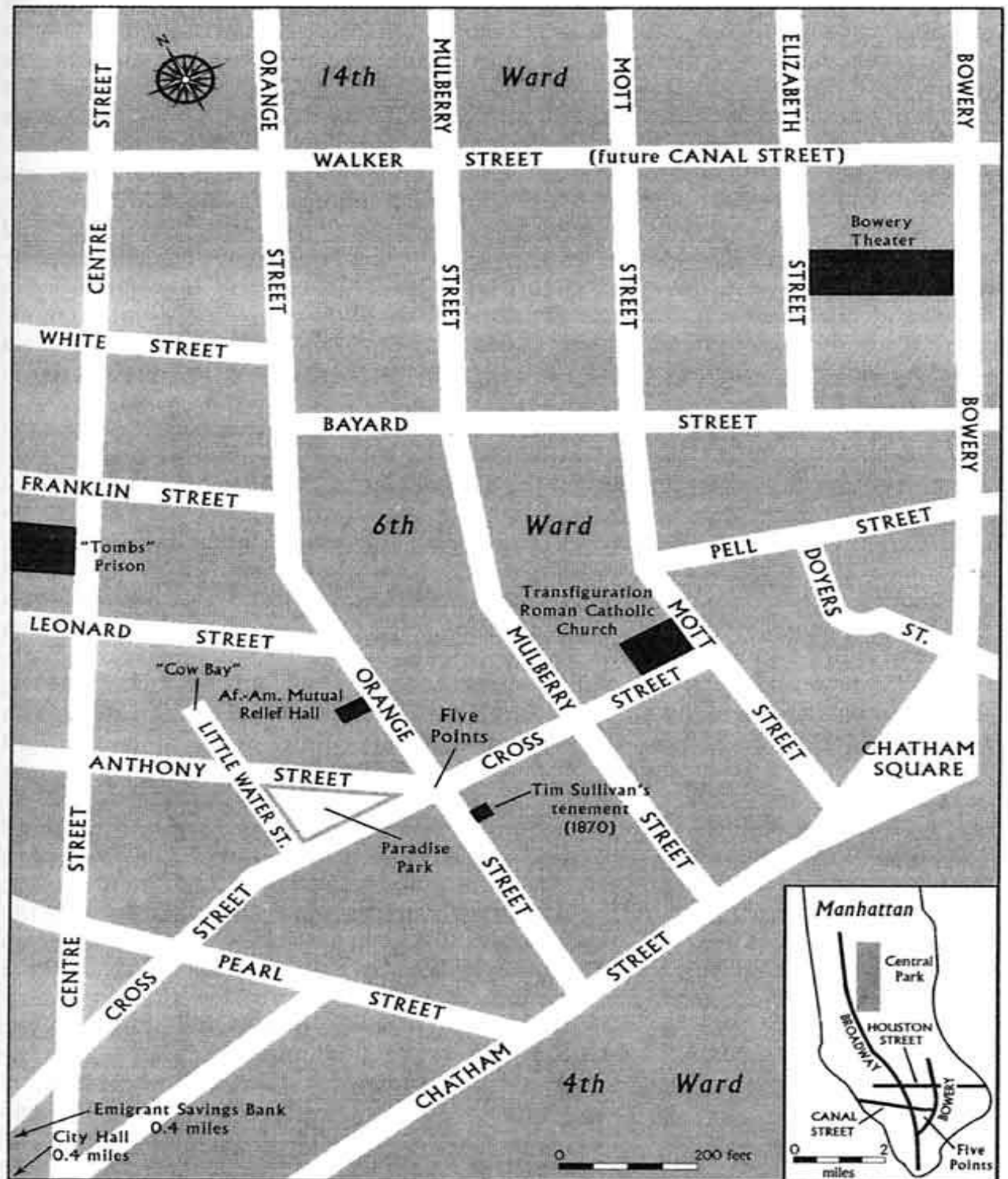
By:  
Sarah Paxton

The Ohio State University  
June 2012

Project Advisor: Dr. Randolph Roth, Department of History

*A special thank you to my advisor,  
Dr. Randolph Roth, for his wisdom  
and direction during the  
development of this project*

*A huge thank you, also, to my  
family and friends for their  
constant support despite having to  
listen to my incessant talk of 19<sup>th</sup>  
century crime.*



Map 1: The Sixth Ward, 1851<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Anbinder, Tyler. (April 2002). From Famine to Five Points. *The American historical Review*. Vol 107, No 2. Retrieved from: [www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/107.2/ah0202000351.html](http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/107.2/ah0202000351.html)

In lower Manhattan, New York, Worth and Baxter Street converge on a relatively calm intersection next to a Chinatown playground. In 1830, however, this intersection consisted of four streets. Little Water, Orange, Anthony, and Cross all created a five pointed intersection, giving its neighborhood the name “Five Points.” The streets created a triangle of space within the Five Points neighborhood, which locals dubbed ‘Paradise Park.’ The park name quickly became ironic. A part of the Sixth Ward of New York City, the Five Points neighborhood became the most notorious slum in American history.

According to the inquests of the New York City coroner, there were eighty-two total inquests filed in the Sixth Ward between 1833 and 1835. A second sample of coroner’s inquests, those filed between 1847 and 1849, showed two hundred and sixty eight inquests filed. The breakdown of these inquests is demonstrated in Figure 1 below.

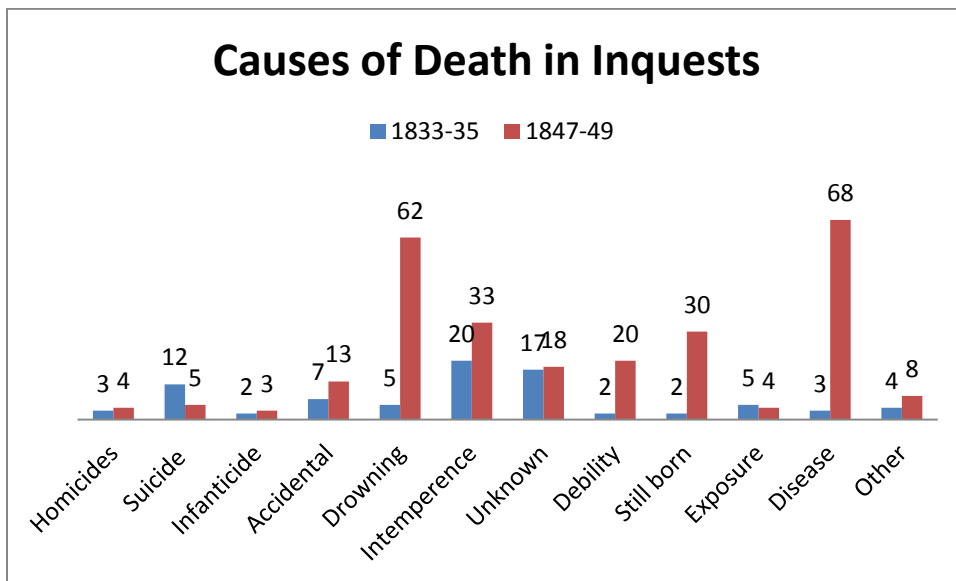


Figure 1<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Coroner’s inquests, New York City Municipal Archives, Reel numbers 7-8 and 36-39

The limitations of the coroner's inquests should be addressed before progressing further. An inquest was not recorded for every death but rather those that the coroner was not completely certain of the cause of death. The coroner would then call a jury of no more than twenty-three and subpoena witnesses. With the coroner, the jury would judge the witness testimony and study the body to determine the official cause of death.<sup>3</sup> While the coroner's inquests are sufficient to provide general insight into life and death of the early nineteenth century Sixth Ward, it should be regarded as preliminary research.

Referring back to Figure One, this was a giant leap in the amount of death<sup>4</sup> in the Sixth Ward in a short period of time. The next step in the research was to discover whether this spike in deaths correlated with an increase in violent death as recorded by the coroner's inquests. This was done by an in-depth study of the content of the coroner's inquests, beginning with those of Dr. John Cahill, the New York coroner for the first sample of inquests, and Dr. William A. Walters, the coroner of the second sample. The statistics of violent deaths in the inquests are compared in Figure 2.

---

<sup>3</sup> Duer, John, *The Revised Statutes of the State of New York, as Altered by Subsequent Enactments, Together with Statutory Provisions of a general nature, Passed between the years 1828 and 1845...* 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Vol 2. Albany, 1846. 3 vols. *The Making of Modern Law: Primary Sources*. Web. 21 May 2012 pg 827-828

<sup>4</sup> When the term "death" is used in this context, it is referring to death that the coroner's filed an inquest for, not the death rate in reference to the general population.

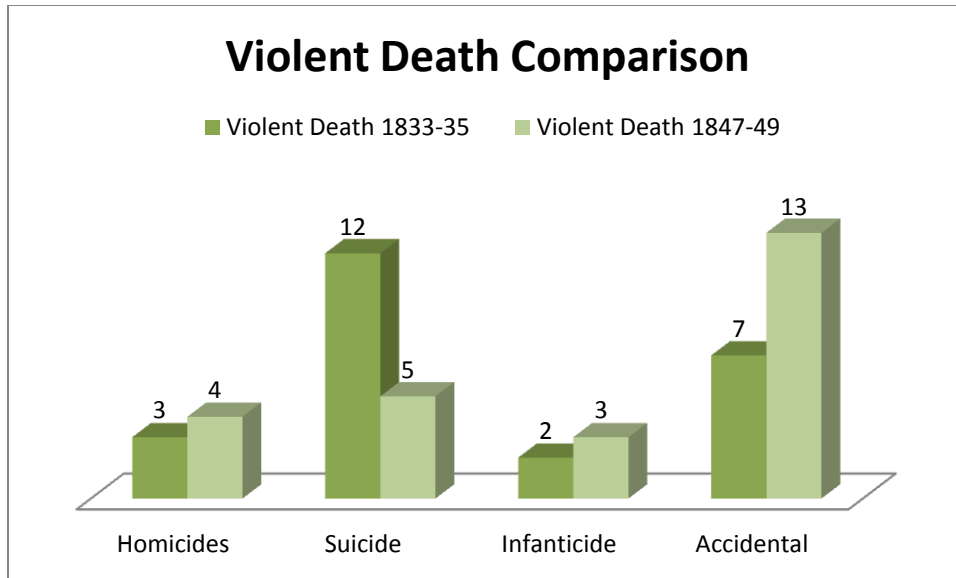


Figure 2<sup>5</sup>

As shown in Figure 2, the violent deaths of homicide<sup>6</sup> and infanticide did increase, but not by the same number that the escalation in total death suggested they would. The newspapers of the era also repeatedly reported that the Five Points and the Sixth Ward were the most violent locations in the city. A higher homicide and infanticide rate were initial expectations when research began. When it was discovered that the number of homicides did not significantly increase, research turned to what characteristics of the Sixth Ward, specifically the Five Points neighborhood, contributed to the violent reputation in the media and the homicides and infanticides that did occur. The hypothesis was the rush of immigration due to the potato famine that began in Europe, especially Ireland, in 1845. This immigration would mean that the immigrants were likely impoverished so they would settle in the Five Points. The effects of heavy immigration would induce negative effects on the Sixth Ward. This insurgence of Irish

<sup>5</sup> Coroner's inquests, New York City Municipal Archives, Reel numbers 7-8 and 36-39

<sup>6</sup> A definition should be noted for "homicide" in the context of this paper. Because homicide will only be discussed in regards to the coroner's inquests, the term "homicide" will refer to inquests that listed the cause of death as some variation of 'wounds inflicted by another person.' There will not be a difference noted for Homicide 1, 2, or manslaughter.

into the Sixth Ward is also suggested by the vast amount of Irish present in the coroner's inquests, as demonstrated in Figure 3.

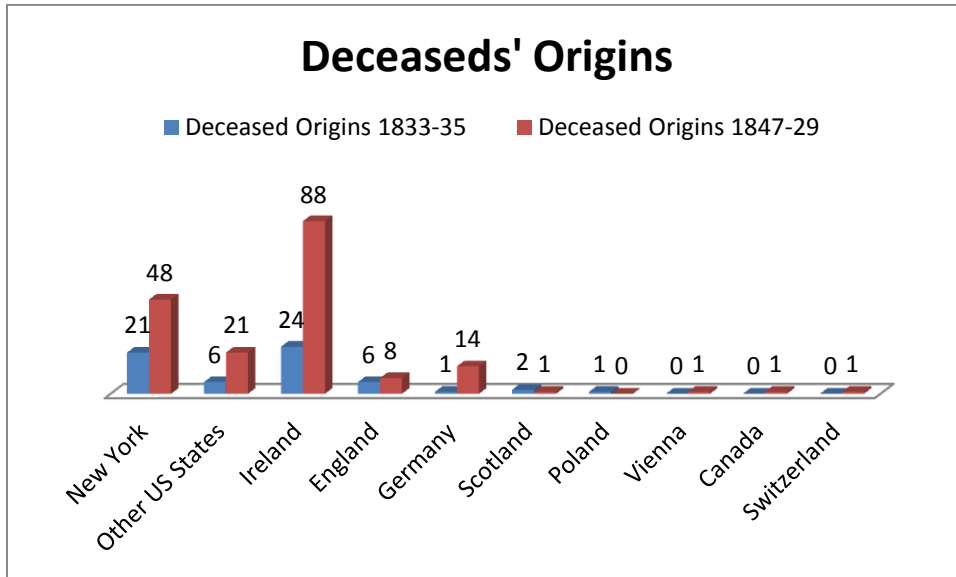


Figure 3<sup>7</sup>

One characteristic of society that corresponds to an increase in violence and the rush of Irish into the Sixth Ward is addressed for each crime, alcohol for homicide and poverty for infanticide. This does not suggest that there is only one contributing factor for either crime. A combination of societal factors typically correlates with a crime. However, for the sake of brevity, the characteristic that had the greatest impact on the crime when the inquests are taken into account is the only one discussed.

The homicides and infanticides do contribute to the violent reputation of the Five Points, however they were not as prominent as newspapers suggest. Another influential criminal aspect of the neighborhood was then studied. While not addressed in my main primary source, the

<sup>7</sup> Coroner's inquests, New York City Municipal Archives, Reel numbers 7-8 and 36-39

coroner's inquests, the development of the first American street gangs in the Five Points are a pivotal marker in the violent history of the Sixth Ward.

Rosanna Peers, or Rosetta<sup>8</sup> depending on who is telling the tale, owned a grocery store on Center Street. It had the same piles of vegetables, decaying in the New York air, which any grocery store displayed, but Rosanna kept the secret to her popularity in the backroom. She sold the sharp, fiery liquor that was popular in saloons at noticeably lower prices. The 1825 grocery speakeasy quickly became a common meeting place for the seedy underbelly of New York City. The pick pockets, thieves, and murderers that congregated in the back of Rosie's developed a hierarchy with defined leadership. This leadership made them more legitimate than the previous so-called 'gangs,' which were groups of orphans and teenagers who enjoyed terrorizing their neighbors, making the criminals the first American street gang. These Irish gangsters called themselves The Forty Thieves."<sup>9</sup> They ruled the Five Points for over ten years.

The Five Points was a distinctly ethnic district. Dr. Tyler Anbinder, of George Washington University, gives us the number that a "full 89% of Five Points residents" were foreign born, higher than any other New York neighborhood.<sup>10</sup> This large number of the immigrants typically arrived from the economically impoverished sections of European countries such as Germany and Ireland. The Five Points slum was the only neighborhood that the impoverished Irish could afford so many settled in the Sixth Ward. In Ireland, sixty percent of the population lived in what officials called "fourth class housing," which referred to the

---

<sup>8</sup> Tim Delaney, *American Street Gangs* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education Inc, 2006) pg 37

<sup>9</sup> Herbert Asbury, *The Gangs of New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008) pg 19-20

<sup>10</sup> Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points* (New York: Plume, 2002) , pg 43



dilapidated sod huts of the lowest economic class in Ireland.<sup>11</sup> Irish residents of the fourth class depended almost wholly on the potato for nutrition, since it was found that a diet of potato would not lead to any severe vitamin or mineral deficiency. Because a large majority of the Irish depended on the potato, and only the potato, as a means of sustenance, the potato famine, occurring between 1845 and 1851,<sup>12</sup> was devastating to the laborers of Ireland. During the famine years and the period of economic depression that followed, there was a large wave of emigration from Ireland and other famine impacted states, such as Germany. Searching for work, many of these immigrants settled in the bustling city of New York, including the Five Points.

Drawing from the ethnically Irish characteristics of the Five Points, street gangs similar to The Forty Thieves continued to grow after 1825 in the thriving grocery speakeasies and dance halls of New York. The Plug Uglies wore oversized plug hats stuffed with cloth, which they pulled down over their ears during battle to serve as a helmet. The Shirt Tails wore the end of their shirts untucked from their trousers and the Roach Guards wore a red stripe. Some gang divisions were based on what county of Ireland the member had come from. The Kerryonians were composed of Irish natives of County Kerry, Ireland, and typically stayed together around Center Street.

While the Irish communities in the Paradise square district were likely more accepting of their own kind, not all Americans were as welcoming. The influx of the Irish was the largest rush of immigrants since the colonial era, and some native-born Americans found their increasing presence a threat to the United States. The ships that delivered the immigrants were what

---

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Bartlett, *Ireland: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) pg 284

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid* pg 281

Thomas Bartlett referred to as “floating fever wards,”<sup>13</sup> the cities quickly became over crowded, which led to the development of slums like the Five Points,<sup>14</sup> and, to top it all off, they were Catholic. The irate Americans saw this as a sure sign that the United States needed to be protected from the invading, disease ridden, economically destitute, and morally bankrupt immigrants who were pouring onto American land as their own country was ravaged by the potato blight. These individuals who objected to the alien presence formed a group referred to as the Nativists and voiced their disdain publicly through newspapers and political campaigns.

Due to the qualms listed above and the gang violence present in the Five Points, Nativists deduced that all Irish were, in essence, no good. In 1849, *The Irish American* published a retaliation to comments made by a ‘confederate soldier’ that said “The Irish must be taught the Roman values of honesty and truth.” “There for [sic] causing the inevitable inference that they are a race of liars and thieves.”<sup>15</sup> They seemed to overlook the fact that, while the Irish gangs controlled the five points, Nativist gangs controlled the neighborhood north of the Five Points called The Bowery. Taking names such as the True Blue Americans, the American Guards, and the Bowery B’hoys,<sup>16</sup> native gangs were often at odds with the Irish just south of their territories. Herbert Asbury, an early twentieth century journalist who wrote the famed *The Gangs of New York*, goes into great detail on the violent and bloody skirmishes that erupted in the streets between the Bowery B’hoys and the Dead Rabbits, a break off faction of the Roach Guards who bore a blue pinstripe on their pants.<sup>17</sup> During these fights, the other Irish-born street gangs, who

---

<sup>13</sup> David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988) pg 67

<sup>14</sup> Ibid pg 72

<sup>15</sup> *The Irish American* Sept 23, 1849, pg 2, col 2, “Defamation of the Irish Race”

<sup>16</sup> Anbinder pg 178

<sup>17</sup> Asbury, pg 20-21

were known to fight one another as often as they could<sup>18</sup>, would ally themselves behind the Dead Rabbits when they shared the common enemy of the Bowery gangs.<sup>19</sup> The alliances that formed amongst usual rivals show just how deeply the ethnic line was drawn between the Irish-born and the Nativists, both of whom reacted with violence.

The violent tendencies of the Sixth Ward gangs were quickly recognized by individuals and groups with political aspirations and utilized during elections. The gangs willingly worked for political organizations, some accepting money or, more commonly, promised political power once their patron was elected.<sup>20</sup> During the first meeting of a primary election, the most crucial as the chairman who will run the proceedings was elected, violence broke out often. Gang members could be used to control the meeting hall, which could mean removing the opposition's power players from the hall under the pretense of maintaining order.<sup>21</sup> During the primary election itself, gangs were used to intimidate voters. The hope was that the people would be too intimidated by the 'fighters,' as gang members were referred, to approach the polling place, ensuring that the candidate that the gang represented would win the majority of the vote.<sup>22</sup> The gangs' political involvement is a testament to how heated elections could become during this period. The election riot of 1834 is a prime example of how out of hand the fighters could become.

The riot, which began on Tuesday, April 8, 1834, was primarily between Andrew Jackson's Democrats and the newly formed Whig party who were competing for the seats that the democrats currently occupied in the New York municipal government. The Sixth Ward,

---

<sup>18</sup> Delaney pg 38

<sup>19</sup> Asbury pg 21

<sup>20</sup> Anbinder, pg 147

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, pg 151

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, pg 153

already known for its violent atmosphere, became the center of the riot. The Whigs claimed that the democrats began the poor political etiquette by tearing down Whig propaganda banners and invading their Sixth Ward committee rooms. The Whigs responded by increasing their presence at the Sixth Ward polling places in an effort to thwart the Democrat fighters' intimidation of potential Whig party voters. Democrats claimed that instead of just warding off intimidators, the Whigs brandished weapons and spit slurs at the Irish present. Fist fights erupted at the polls, the gang fighters undoubtedly at the center of the chaos. With their main aim to highlight President Jackson's 'unconstitutional' actions, the Whigs built a massive warship, presumably on wheels, that they named *Constitution*. That affront to the Democrats' constitutional honor provoked further rioting on Wednesday, the second day of polling. On Thursday, the third and final day of polling, the election riot came to a climax. Supposedly, a member of the *Constitution's* crew, which was parked on the western edge of the Sixth Ward perimeter, attacked and assaulted an Irish Five Pointer. He then retreated into the neighborhood and came by with reinforcements described as "Irishmen of the lowest class." The riot that erupted from this event was the worst that had been seen in New York history to that date.<sup>23</sup>

Ethnicity seemed to be linked to a good deal of the gang violence in the ward which intensified after the 1834 election riot. Both the Whigs and Democrats blamed the election riot on the heightened tension between the Irish-born and the Nativists, claiming it was not a "fight between Democrats and Whigs, but 'between the Irish and the Americans'"<sup>24</sup> It also appeared that the Five Points and surrounding Sixth Ward was the point of origin for the physical altercations that were the production of this animosity, further contributing to the demise of the ward's moral reputation. Another riot in 1835 showed that ethnic tension had not diminished,

---

<sup>23</sup> Anbinder, pg 27-28

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, pg 29

and this time politics were not even needed to cause the fight. The origins of this fight are slightly contested due to multiple conflicting witness accounts of the inciting moment. One account claims that it began with a bout of fisticuffs between the Irish O'Connell Guards and the native American Guards, both of which, while operating beneath the guise of being militia corps, shared more characteristics with street gangs. The riot erupted between six and seven in the evening along Pearl and Cross Street in the heart of the Sixth Ward. The rioting continued on Monday on Chatham Street, the number of participants rising into the thousands. While this riot was strikingly less damaging to property, it resulted in two fatalities: a Dr. McCaffery and an English piano maker. Another violent year like that between 1834 and 1835 did not occur again until the draft riots of the latter half of the nineteenth century, but that does not suggest that the tension and animosity between the natives and the Irish-born dwindled. The natives formed a political party, "The Know Nothings," following the final riot and the skirmishes that broke out in its wake. Skirmishes between native and Irish-born gangs continued onward as the Irish poured into the Sixth Ward, erupting into full blown riots like the election riots of 1842 and the Bowery B'hoys riot of 1857. However, the third riot of a long, violent year in 1835 solidified the dangerous reputation of the "Bloody Ould Sixth Ward," and the Five Points status as the most violent portion of the area.<sup>25</sup>

While the increase of violence in the Sixth Ward is not questioned, studying the homicides of the time is a little less straight forward. As mentioned earlier, the number of homicides did not increase as much as the total death. A deeper look into the type of homicide that occurred during the time sheds some light on the nature of homicide in the Sixth Ward. Dr. William A. Walters, the coroner that filed the second sample of inquests, went into far greater

---

<sup>25</sup> Anbinder, pgs 30-31

detail than Dr. Cahill did for his inquests. He recorded testimony for nearly every death that was presented to him, often times from multiple people. The subjects of these testimonies ranged from neighbors, friends, and coworkers to officials of the Alms House, the ward police involved in the case, to the autopsy examiner. By combining the testimony of all those interviewed, a tentative look at the victim and assailant's characters can be gleaned as well as the events leading up to the homicide. These testimonies give us a reasonable idea of what homicide was like between 1847 and 1849. As it turns out, most homicides were fairly similar, like the death of Andrew Mahan.

Between one and two am on November 21, 1847, a man's body was found on the pavement of Leonard Street in the Sixth Ward of New York. Discovered by a group of men, the victim was sprawled half on the sidewalk and half in the curb of the alley where a small pool of blood gathered. The men quickly showed the body to Officer James B. Woods, an officer of the Sixth Ward police station, and his partner. Woods knelt by the victim and felt his wrists, discovering that the man was still alive, though barely. With assistance from the group of men, the victim was transported to the Sixth Ward Police Station and a doctor called. However, by the time the doctor arrived, the man was deceased. He had likely passed during transit to the station, where they arrived around two a.m., approximately ten minutes after the discovery of the body. A large wound was found to the left of the victim's sternum, which the doctor, and later the coroner, identified as inflicted by another person and as the most likely cause of death. They categorized the death as homicide. James Woods recalled that three men were seen walking down Leonard St. shortly before the group he had followed and had been talking and singing

loudly. It was decided that the victim and his killer must have been in that group of three. The victim was quickly identified as Andrew Mahan.<sup>26</sup>

Andrew Mahan was a twenty-two year old Irish immigrant living in New York in 1847. He was employed at the Phoenix Foundry for Hogg and Delemater in lower Manhattan, where he had worked for about 3 months, beginning around the end of August, 1847. His co-workers found him of a generally pleasant disposition, despite his boisterous conversation in the work room that occasionally aggravated some of his peers. However, Mr. McGlain, who had known Andrew Mahan for three years, described him as his co-workers did, but added that when Mahan would get ‘wild... and a little bit quarrelsome’ when intoxicated. Mr. McGlain explained the John Dunlaney had held a party in the dance hall he ran on the bottom floor of the apartment building he owned at 128 Anthony Street the night of November 20. Mahan had been present at the soiree, partaking of the liquor that was provided and dancing. He was described as having “drank but was not drunk.” Another man, identified in the inquest only as “The Prisoner Bracto,”<sup>27</sup> i.e. the suspect, was also present at 128 Anthony the night of the homicide. He was an employee of Phoenix Foundry as well, but unlike his co-workers, he did not care for Mahan. He had told Mr. McGlain that he didn’t care for Mr. Mahan’s disposition and would soon be clear of him if he could. However, Bracto and Mahan were seen socializing together at Dunlaney’s dance hall, although he had not been drinking or dancing while at 128 Anthony. The pair was seen leaving together, although no one remembered a third individual leaving with them, around one a.m.

---

<sup>26</sup> Coroner’s Inquests, New York Municipal Archives, Reel Number 36, Inquests on Andrew Mahan, November 21, 1847

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

Bracto was arrested by the police of the Sixth Ward the morning following the homicide. While no knife was found on him, blood was discovered on his coat that a witness recognized as being the same worn by Bracto the previous evening at 128 Anthony. Bracto told his version of the night's events to Officer Dennis Dorfain, who had been Officer Woods' partner on Leonard St. Bracto claimed that while they were walking down Leonard Street, they ran into another group of three or four men, one of whom 'smirked' at Mahan. Mahan then drunkenly called the man a son of a bitch and turned to fight the crowd. Bracto claimed to have taken no part in any brawl nor had he seen any blood on Mahan. He left Mahan on Leonard St. and walked toward Elm Street to go straight home.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the Sixth Ward's reputation of a generally violent atmosphere, the homicide rate in the ward was not much different from the rest of the state of New York in the first half of the nineteenth century. The number of homicides, it would appear, did not change much with the rush of Irish immigration that followed the potato famine in Ireland, as one would expect it would, especially because there was an escalation in general violence as demonstrated by the rise of the street gangs. In fact, the number remained about the same. Between 1833 and 1835, there were approximately three homicides documented in the coroner's inquests. Between 1847 and 1849, there were four homicides documented by the coroner. The fact that the number of homicides remained approximately the same suggests that, while general crime and violence increased within the Five Points during the period between 1833 and 1849, there was little effect on homicide.

---

<sup>28</sup> Coroner's Inquests, New York City Municipal Archives, Reel Number 36, Inquest on Andrew Mahan, November 21, 1847



Homicides typically fell in three categories: romantically motivated, alcohol infused, or both. Romantic violence typically did not fall within the category of homicide, but it did happen on occasion. For instance, Rachel Kelly of 111 Mulberry Street was killed by her husband Peter Kelly on June 8, 1848. Dr. Anbinder tells the story of Charles Thomas, who shot a man because he saw his ‘paramour’ speaking to him.<sup>29</sup> More common were homicides that occurred while either the victim or the assailant had been drinking alcohol, such as the homicide of the aforementioned Andrew Mahan. Logically, this would make sense as alcohol is known to change the patience threshold and disposition of individuals, as Mr. McGlain said it did to Mahan. In comparison to the other ethnicities represented in the Sixth Ward, alcoholism was much more common among the Irish immigrants, which Dr. Anbinder ties to some cultural or genetic factors, which then led to a higher number of Irish immigrants being victims of homicide than non-Irish immigrants.

Alcohol had its place in a number of violent crimes and quickly found its way to being a fixture of everyday life in the Sixth Ward. It was not uncommon to see individuals stumbling their way through the streets in mid morning nor was it rare for the police to rouse the neighborhood drunkards from whatever place they chose to sleep the night. *The Sun* ran a report on Mary Busch and Johana Tracey, who were awoken from a gutter in the Five Points in November, 1833. Both committed into custody and still intoxicated, Tracey thought that she had gone into custody “of her own accord” rather than being forced into a cell by the police of the Sixth Ward. Intemperance was the leading cause of death in the Sixth Ward, both before and after the initial rush of Irish immigrants, as shown in the chart below. Of the 350 deaths recorded by the coroner, fifty-three of them were related to intemperance, making it

---

<sup>29</sup> Anbinder, pg 226

approximately fifteen percent of the total death during the time periods studied. This number would suggest that alcohol was a common vice within the Sixth Ward.

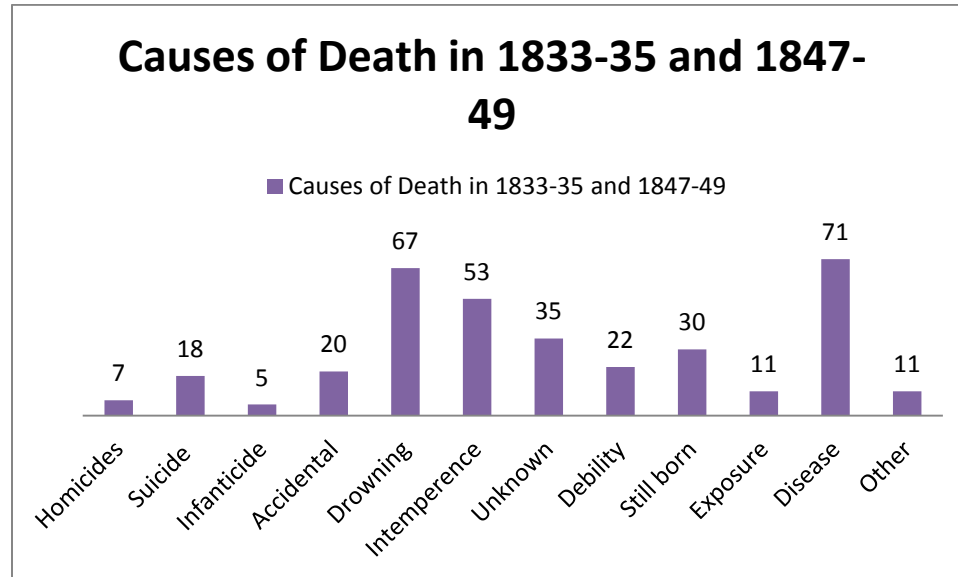


Figure 4<sup>30</sup>

Alcohol seemed to have a devastating effect on society within the Five Points. There was a tavern at least on every block, often times more than one, and Five Points locations were known for selling the cheapest liquor in town.<sup>31</sup> Bars were often located on the bottom floor of tenement buildings, which led to regularly inebriated residents, such as Mr. Farrell’s building on Leonard Street. Taverns became the congregating grounds for the underbelly of society, like the grocery-store speakeasies that facilitated the formation of organized street gangs in New York. Highly inebriated abusers were exceptionally clumsy individuals as well, which could lead to violent accidents, like the death of William Brown in June, 1848. He entered the sweeps hall on Orange Street and tripped, falling head first into the corner of the table, an injury that caused a fatal brain hemorrhage and Mr. Brown’s death. The fall barely registered for Mr. Brown as he

<sup>30</sup> Coroner’s Inquests, New York City Municipal Archives, Reel Numbers 7-8 and 36-39, 1833-35 and 1847-1849

<sup>31</sup> Anbinder, pg 232

continued to stumble about the neighborhood until stopped by Sixth Ward Police Officer James Watson, who was not entirely surprised to see the injured Mr. Brown. He described William Brown as having been in town only a short while and being drunk the majority of the time.<sup>32</sup> An inebriated Mr. Michael Margin decided to climb a ladder on 92 Orange Street and fell during his efforts. At the time of the printing of the *Irish-American*, his recovery was doubtful.<sup>33</sup>

Alcohol also had a negative impact on the youth of the ward, whose alcoholic parents' inability to function well placed heavy responsibility on their children. *The Sun* reported a woman by the name of Tye who lived at 111 Mulberry Street. She was accused by her neighbors of being a vagrant drunk and unable to provide for her five children. The accusations caused Tye and her family to be sent to the Sixth Ward Alms House for assistance.<sup>34</sup> Children were often forced into crime to support themselves, perpetuating the criminal culture of the Five Points into new generations. This culture of the Five Points was not lost on parents and the effect that it would have on their children. Rampant disease, poverty, and violence were all factors that parents considered. Some parents found these factors, and the effect of a child on their own lives, as too daunting. These parents were then the perpetrators of infanticide<sup>35</sup>, another violent occurrence in the Five Points.

Number 73 Mulberry Street was a tenement building in the Sixth Ward of New York City in 1848. Similar to most tenement buildings, privacy within the house was limited. So when Mrs. Barburry Weedmeyer, a widow and resident of the basement, spent an odd amount of time in the cellar of the building on Thursday, February 15, her behavior was quickly noted by a resident of

---

<sup>32</sup> Coroner's Inquests, New York City Municipal Archives, Reel Number 37, Inquest on William Brown, June 2, 1848

<sup>33</sup> *The Irish American*, 12-16-1849 Accident: pg 2, col 1

<sup>34</sup> *The Sun*, 11-13-1833, Police Office: pg 2, col 3

<sup>35</sup> Infanticide will refer to the suspicious deaths of infants and caused by another person, as designated in the coroner's inquests. Distinctions in type of infanticide (murder, etc) will not be made.

the third floor, Mrs. Dorothy Oppild. Upon noticing a patch of what appeared to be six to eight foot blood stain on the floor of the cellar, she informed a fellow resident, Mary Grund. Grund lived in the basement with Weedmeyer and had noticed that Weedmeyer had been in a “family way,” a common term for pregnant. When Mrs. Oppild showed Grund the blood stain in the cellar and voiced her opinion that Weedmeyer had given birth Thursday night, Grund entertained the possibility. Mrs. Oppild took her concerns to the Sixth Ward station early Friday morning.

Around 10 am Friday morning, Adolphus Minocho, a police officer of the Sixth Ward, arrived at 73 Mulberry to investigate Mrs. Oppild’s claims. He greeted Mrs. Weedmeyer in the basement and, after Weedmeyer made a show of misplacing the key that was ultimately found in her dress pocket, the pair entered the cellar. Officer Minocho began looking around the cellar, observing the multitude of coal barrels that occupied the room. However, he found no evidence that a child had been concealed in the cellar. Mrs. Weedmeyer asked him why he was there, to which he expressed the concerns of members of the building. She vehemently denied the accusations, claiming repeatedly that she “got no child,” that the blood could have come from anyone in the house, and that she “felt ashamed of the people in the house.” Minocho kept pushing, questioning her about the sounds Mrs. Oppild claimed to have heard by the coal barrels and then threatening to call a doctor to inspect her for signs of recent child birth. Barburry Weedmeyer balked at the idea, pleading with him that he must not call the physician. Officer Minocho’s response was that Mrs. Weedmeyer must then show him where she hid the child or come down to the station with him, swearing that no one else would learn of what happened if she gave him the child. Mrs. Weedmeyer moved to the coal barrels and withdrew a small, coal dust coated body from the confines of one of the barrels. She claimed that she had dropped the female infant on the steps, though there was no blood present on the steps leading to the cellar.

She handed the body to Officer Minocho, who noticed bruising around the infant's neck. Officer Minocho took Weedmeyer to the Sixth Ward police station and the deceased to the coroner's office, where Dr. Thomas Holmes verified the bruising around the neck and found blood beneath the infant's scalp. Weedmeyer did not offer any explanation as to why she had secreted the child in the cellar's coals.<sup>36</sup>

While general violent crime was considered to be exaggerated by the media of the time, but including infanticide in that generalization is questionable. Incidents such as the one that occurred at #73 Mulberry Street were not unheard of in the Five Points during the first half of the nineteenth century. One of the most common locations where infants were discovered was the river. The bodies were delivered to the Alms House in the Sixth Ward where they were transferred to the coroner's office for an autopsy. Unfortunately, by the time that these bodies were withdrawn from the water, they were often too decomposed to determine a cause of death. While some were likely still born, as was also common in the coroner's inquests, most of these children were likely victims of infanticide.

---

<sup>36</sup> Coroner's inquest, New York Municipal Archives, Reel Number 39, Inquest on Female Infant, February 15, 1849

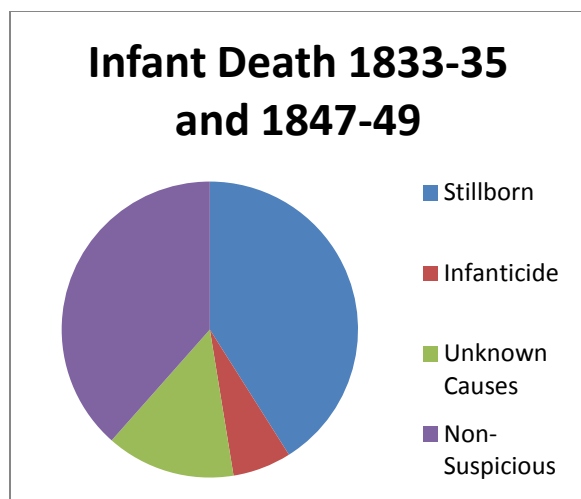


Figure 5<sup>37</sup>

Stillborn	32	Total: 78
Infanticide	5	
Unknown Causes	11	
Non-Suspicious	30	

Table 1<sup>38</sup>

As listed above, there were thirty documented inquests that listed a stillbirth as the cause of death for an infant in the years studied. While some of the bodies found in the river were intact enough as to determine that they were stillbirths, many of the stillbirths recorded were delivered to the coroner's office or to the Sixth Ward Alms House by the parents of the deceased. The multitude of personal deliveries of the stillborn to the coroner's office recorded in the inquests suggests that it was not an unusual occurrence. This raises suspicions about the bodies whose cause of death cannot be identified and were discovered abandoned in various locations. If we are to include even half the infants that were found in the river or other abandoned locations, the 'unknown causes' that are listed in the above figures, the rate of infanticide as a cause of infant death rises from approximately 6 percent to 14 percent in the years studied. While this would not make infanticide a common occurrence, it would make infanticide a more common crime and suggest that while the press may have exaggerated the amount of infanticide, it was perhaps not to the same degree that we had thought.

<sup>37</sup> Coroner's inquests, New York Municipal Archives, Reel Numbers 7-8 and 36-39, 1833-35 and 1847-49

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

A contribution to this escalation was likely the rise in population in the neighborhood and the low economic standards that characterized the neighborhood. Financial hardship was a staple of the neighborhood and children were an added strain. The infants retrieved from the river were typically found at the foot of streets in the First, Third, Fourth, Seventh, and one or two other Wards which all bordered the river and the Sixth Ward. These lower Manhattan districts were also known to be impoverished, once the wealthy were forced northward by the massive immigration of the 1840s, and served as common stomping grounds for Five Pointers due to their close proximity to the neighborhood. It is said that once the Old Brewery in the Five Points was demolished, Gotham Court on Cherry Street in the Fourth Ward took its place as the reigning tenement of squalor.<sup>39</sup>

The tenement houses that characterized the Five Points, such as #73 Mulberry Street and the Old Brewery, were a testament to the economic depression that characterized the residents of the neighborhood. The number of tenement building increased during the 1830's and 40's to house the influx of residents that congregated in the Five Points. By the 1850's, the building type was a common fixture of ward architecture. Built from wood before 1850, the tenements were generally two and a half story structures that were renovated from the original buildings. A single building was divided into two to five apartments that were usually atop a commercial establishment run by the Landlord.<sup>40</sup> These commercial establishments were often enterprises such as bars, which supplied the house and surrounding populace with alcohol. Such an establishment was run by Mr. Farrell on Leonard Street. The residents of this building included Mr. Farrell, his wife, Mr. Kerklund, Mr. Trull, Mr. Duqleys, Mr. Bennett, Mr. Shater, Mr. Powell, and a maid named Rose O'Brien who lived in the kitchen. Privacy was limited in such

---

<sup>39</sup> Asbury, pg 43

<sup>40</sup> Anbinder, pgs 72-73

crowded buildings and the residents who lived in a tenement often associated with one another in the commercial bar room on the lower level of the building.<sup>41</sup>

Within tenements, entire families would be crowded into a single room which they would sometime share with other residents. This made finding beds difficult. It was not uncommon for the children of a family to sleep on the floor of their apartment on bundles of cloth in place of a mattress. Beyond that, the families were known to allow others to pay for a spot to sleep in the room. These individuals were called “lodgers,” or residents who paid for bed space only. Boarders found renting out lodging necessary as the apartments in tenements came at shockingly high rates for the conditions in which the people had to live. Despite the squalor of Five Points tenements, they ran anywhere from five to ten dollars for a three room apartment.<sup>42</sup> With the high price of accommodations, families struggled to provide other necessities for their families. According to the coroner’s reports, the majority of declared infanticides were committed by women away from their families or widows, such as Mrs. Weedmeyer at #73 Mulberry, whose husband had passed about eight months prior,<sup>43</sup> and a Mrs. Anne Grafton, whose husband had been in New Orleans for nearly two months.<sup>44</sup> Work for women was hard to come by. The majority became seamstresses. However, it was impossible to support a family on the small wages that the position of seamstress was paid.<sup>45</sup> Adding another mouth to the equation only increased the difficulty with which the women of the Five Points lived, increasing the likelihood of infanticide within the society. Mrs. Grojan was well aware of this struggle. In January, 1849,

---

<sup>41</sup> Coroner’s inquest, New York City Municipal Archives, Reel Number 37, Inquest on Thomas Powell, June 19, 1848

<sup>42</sup> Anbinder, pg 102

<sup>43</sup> Coroner’s inquest, New York Municipal Archives, Reel Number 39, Inquest on Male Infant, February 15, 1849

<sup>44</sup> Coroner’s Inquest, New York Municipal Archives, Reel Number 38, Inquest on Female Infant, November 8, 1848

<sup>45</sup> Anbinder, pg 120



her two-year-old son, John Grojan, was found dying in St. Peter's Church. Mrs. Grojan and her six other children were found sitting on the front steps of the Church, her husband having died on their recent voyage to New York from Ireland.<sup>46</sup>

The doubling of the percentage of infanticide within the coroners inquests, including the potential infanticides found in the river, and the increased economic depression caused by heavy immigration and dense population in the Sixth Ward, is a fairly firm correlate. Considering the poverty of the neighboring wards and that infanticides recorded by the coroner were most often committed by abandoned or widowed women, it would appear that economic hardship was a contributing factor to the increased presence within the coroner's inquests of infanticide within the Sixth Ward.

The Five Points was a slum that had many factors that could have contributed to an escalated rate of violence in the neighborhood. There are correlations between the gang violence and the Nativist movement, homicide and alcohol, and infanticide and poverty. But there is a general conclusion that can be drawn from the study of the coroner's inquests and a look into the Sixth Ward. The two samples of inquests that were studied border on the years of the potato famine in Europe. As previously mentioned, the famine hit the impoverished sections of Europe, devastating the livelihood of thousands of the laborers and their employers. These laborers then emigrated from their native lands, occasionally funded by their employer who was aware they could not afford housing the laborers any longer, and arrived in America. A large number of these then remained in the Sixth Ward and Five Points. The increased population in such a short period of time did not allow for the Sixth Ward to properly accommodate them. This led to vast

---

<sup>46</sup> Coroner's Inquest, New York Municipal Archives, Reel Number 39, Inquest on John Grojan, January 24, 1849

overcrowding, decreased employment opportunities, and an increased presence of the foreign born in American neighborhoods.

While we are aware that the potato famine hit Ireland the hardest and the amount of coroner's inquests for Irish immigrants suggest they were a majority of the new immigrants, it would be irresponsible to put the blame for an increase in violence in the Sixth Ward on the only the incoming Irish. Rather, it was a combination of the Irish immigrants inability to fully acclimate to American society, New York's inability to handle a large scale immigration movement, and the negative reaction of the Nativists to the Irish movement.

## References

1. Anbinder, Tyler. *Five Points*. New York: Plume, 2002
2. Anbinder, Tyler. (April 2002). From Famine to Five Points: Lord Lansdowne's Irish Tenants Encounter North America's Most Notorious Slum. *The American Historical Review*. Vol 107, No 2. Retrieved from:  
[www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/107.2/ah0202000351.html](http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/107.2/ah0202000351.html)
3. Asbury, Herbert. *The Gangs of New York*. New York: Vintage Books, 2008
4. Bartlett, Thomas. *Ireland: A History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010
5. Bennett, David H. *The Party of Fear*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988
6. Coroner's Inquests, New York City Municipal Archives, Reel Numbers 7-8, January 1833- August 1835
7. Coroner's Inquests, New York City Municipal Archives, Reel Numbers 36-39, December 1847-April 1849
8. Delaney, Tim. *American Street Gangs*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education Inc, 2006
9. Duer, John. *The Revised Statutes of the State of New-York, as Altered by Subsequent Enactments, Together with Statutory Provisions of a General Nature, Passed Between the Years 1828 and 1845 Inclusive, Arranged in Connection with the Same of Kindred Subjects in the Revised Statutes: With Notes of Decisions by the Courts upon the Provisions Contained in the Text*. 3rd Edition Vol. 2. Albany, 1846. 3 vols. *The Making of Modern Law: Primary Sources*. Web. 31 May 2012.
10. *The Irish American* Sept 23, 1849, pg 2, column 2, "Defamation of the Irish Race"

11. *The Irish American*, December 16, 1849, pg 2, column 1, “Accident”

12. *The Sun*, November 13, 1833, pg 2, column 3, “Police Office”