

# **Gangs of New York: Brutish Thugs or Political Strategists and Architects of a Unique Subculture?**

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## **Chapter 1**

### *Section I: Introduction.*

During the nineteenth century, corruption and payoffs governed every level of New York City politics and law enforcement. In the midst of this corruption, hundreds of thousands of immigrants flooded the New York harbors to escape famine and persecution only to arrive in the Five Points, America's most notorious slum neighborhood. Out of these horrible conditions, gangs were born and eventually thrived in a neighborhood where crime and vice were customary. Rival gangs would engage in bloody battles over territory. Even Fire companies, composed mainly of gang members, would fight one another for the rights to put out the flames of a burning building. Despite the fact that these gangs were robust, hard-nosed and virulent men, they were not ignorant thugs. The crime and vice undertaken by such groups were rational responses to the hardships faced in the Five Points. Furthermore, through politics and the creation of a unique subculture, these gangs proved themselves to be more than brutish drinking fraternities, advancing themselves to prominence and controlling a significant part of the New York City political machine. This paper will explore the world in which the gangs of New York lived, and how they learned to survive by creating a unique subculture and manipulating politics.

Sean Wilentz' *Chants Democratic*, Tyler Anbinder's *Five Points: The 19<sup>th</sup> Century New York City Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum*, and Burrows and Wallace's *Gotham* are the three main sources used in this paper to support the significance of gangs in 19<sup>th</sup> century New York City. Wilentz focuses on the gangs' contribution to the formation of a new social class. Anbinder is more concerned with the environment in which these gangs were bred and how they created a unique subculture to deal with everyday problems. Burrows and Wallace highlight some of Wilentz' and Anbinder's points about gangs but also offer some insight to the darker side of gang life. Through these sources, this paper will make clear the importance of gang activity in 19<sup>th</sup> century New York. Furthermore they will support that gangs were more than just brutish, ignorant thugs, but architects of a unique subculture and political strategists who served as the foundation for one of the world's greatest cities.

### Section II: Historical Background

To understand the foundations of gang subculture and politics, it is essential to consider the world in which they lived, the most notorious neighborhood in nineteenth-century America, the Five Points. The Five Points, named after the five-cornered intersection of Anthony, Orange and Cross Streets in lower Manhattan, was one of America's earliest slum neighborhoods, congested with filth, garbage, disease, prostitution, drunkenness, violence, and poverty. Despite its contemptible reputation, the Five Points was home to a colorful subculture, a playground for gangs, and the place where tap dancing originated (Anbinder 2). The amalgamation of native New Yorkers

and immigrants from Ireland, Italy, and Germany, presented a unique environment, unfamiliar in other parts of the world.

The Five Points was literally built on top of a five acre lake known as “the Collect.” As New York City expanded and residents started moving northward, the Collect became overcrowded with the city’s noisiest industries, most notably slaughterhouses and tanneries. The fetid carcasses of animals, and industry wastes poured into the lake, converted the once beautiful landmark into a rancid abomination. The Common Council decided to fill the Collect with dirt from Bunker Hill, which was leveled in 1802. By 1813, the Collect had been completely filled, literally laying the ground for decades of ethnic rivalry, political corruption, class resentment, racial hatred, and religious conflict, all of which culminated into the New York City Draft Riots of 1863 (DiGirolamo 125).

As New Yorkers expanded north, trees were mowed down, lakes were covered with dirt, and geographical landmarks were razed. The once beautiful landscape of forests and water was quickly transforming into that of dull and decrepit rows of buildings and homes. One of the greatest cities in the world was only beginning to take shape. While much of New York enjoyed economic success, the Five Points became a run down slum. A number of factors contributed to the deterioration of the Five Points, including the declining economic status of the city’s artisans due to the market revolution, disease, prostitution, and the diversity of its residents.

The declining economic status of the city’s artisans was a major reason for the deterioration of the Five Points area. In a process known as the market revolution the gradual transformation of goods once manufactured on a small scale by local artisans

gave way to mass production in factories both within the city and outside of its borders. This economic transformation seized a significant amount of business from small time, independent artisans, who in turn were forced to hire unqualified workers without proper training. Journeymen and laborers who constituted a large portion of the population tended to have fluctuating incomes, causing them to move frequently and created an impression of instability that made the neighborhood unattractive to prosperous New Yorkers. Because they no longer felt economically secure, masters were less likely to rent long term real estate and provide room and board for their apprentices. Not only was this change detrimental to neighborhoods organized by trade, it divided New York City into commercial and residential districts, such as the Five Points.

The economic pressure during the 1820's and 1830's was so great that landlords were inclined to subdivide their old, decrepit buildings into many small apartments, and spent little or nothing to maintain them. These tenement houses became America's signature immigrant environment. Because Five Points was built over a dirt filled pond, the ground was damp and unsettled, causing structures to shift dramatically. The slightest rain or snowfall would flood basements of homes and shops throughout the neighborhood. Many of the diseases of the period were attributed to dampness, including cholera which was able to flourish in New York City. Cholera is a disease contracted by consuming water contaminated with feces. The disease was able to spread rapidly in tenement houses where outhouses and drinking wells were so close together. "The tendency of cholera to run rampant in impoverished tenement districts led to the belief that it was the dissolute habits of the poor, rather than an inadequate sanitation system, which made one susceptible to the contagion" (Anbinder 23).

Disease was only one the reasons why distinguished New Yorker's avoided the Five Points. The association of the area with African Americans and immigrants also made the Five Points unappealing. The infamy of the Five Points was so great that southerners used it to defend slavery. Southerners justified slavery by claiming that the lives of free men in the Five Points were considerably worse than that of any slave. Abolitionists, on the other hand, also referred to the Five Points to support their political organization, the Republican Party. Five Points was staunchly Democratic and Republicans doubted if a vote had ever been polled there in their favor.

Among its many distasteful features, prostitution became commonly associated with the Five Points. "By 1830, the Five Points had become the center of New York's commercial sex industry, with more bordellos located on Anthony Street between Centre and Orange than on any other block in the city" (Anbinder 19).

A painting by George Catlin extensively illustrates what life was like in the Five Points (Anbinder 25). Catlin depicts fights breaking out in the streets, drunkenness, the mixture of whites and blacks, prostitution, and wandering pigs serving as the neighborhood's sanitation system, eating the immense amount of garbage that lies in the streets. Grocery stores are abundant in the picture as well, which in 1820's New York were the equivalent to liquor stores. These grocery stores served as a political headquarters and meeting place for voters. The fact that Catlin, a well known and distinguished artist, would bother to paint the small neighborhood, demonstrates the nation-wide obsession with the Five Points (Anbinder 26).

The Five Points' lifestyle not only inspired Catlin, but it struck awe into some of the period's other notable figures including author Charles Dickens and abolitionist and

reformer Lydia Maria Child who both toured the neighborhood. Dickens was accountable for allowing Five Points' reputation to become a worldwide phenomenon, describing the appalling conditions in great detail: "These narrow ways, diverging to the right and left, and reeking everywhere with dirt and filth...Debauchery has made the very houses prematurely old. See how rotten the beams are tumbling down, and how the patched and broken windows seem to scowl dimly, like eyes that have been hurt in drunken frays" (Jackson and Dunbar pg). Dickens' visit to the neighborhood made it customary for prominent New Yorker's to go "slumming" with a police escort to see how the other half live. Lydia Maria Child describes Five Points' tenements in *Letters from New York*: "How souls or bodies could live there, I could not imagine...There you will see nearly every form of human misery, every sign of human degradation. The leer of the licentious, the dull sensualism of the drunkard, the sly glance of the thief, oh it made my heart ache for many a day" (Jackson and Dunbar pg). Because people from all over America were reading these publications, they became convinced by the late 1840's that Five Points was the nation's worst neighborhood.

Despite the abominable conditions, and the harsh criticism, Five Points was a beacon of hope for many immigrant families. Immigrants escaped the atrocities in their countries and many received opportunities in the Five Points, being able to create a life for themselves in America. Archaeological evidence unearthed in the early 1990's, of the Bloody Sixth Ward, uncovered 850,000 artifacts that suggest a varied socio-economic life in the Five Points. "The assortment of buttons, needles, fabrics, medicine bottles, combs, hairbrushes, and crockery dug out of the bowels of an old Sixth Ward block hints at the robust presence of home work and family routines that have unfortunately been

overshadowed by the extravagant depiction of ‘the dark side’ all too prominent in nineteenth century accounts of the Five Points” (Palmer 329). Poor Irish immigrants with absolutely nothing were able to establish a foothold in their new homeland of America. Granted it had more fighting, violence, and drunkenness than almost any other area in the world, Five Points also had a brilliant nightlife. Residents enjoyed famed bare knuckle prize fights, dancing halls, and dense networks of clubs, charities and other organizations. Five Points was a neighborhood that generated a unique American subculture, in which gangs were able to develop and eventually thrive, becoming incredibly powerful in the realm of politics.

## **Chapter 2: Historiographical Review**

### *Section I: Chants Democratic, Sean Wilentz.*

Wilentz argues that gangs were important because they played a significant role in the formation of a new social class. The industrialization of the United States gave rise to anti-capitalist politics that contradicted the ideals of the Republic of America. Wilentz writes that the gangs had republican ideas and similar to the unions, tried to make working conditions better. The various gangs of New York were working class men who served as an extension of the unions, but never merged with them. “In one of the more curious riots of the 1830’s, several hundred artists and apprentices, furious at the arrest of a young woman accused of robbing a shoe store, smashed into the store in question and raised the cry “State Prison Monopoly!” (Wilentz 256). This culture which some historians have construed as working class “traditionalism” provided a barrier against the unifying and sophisticated class consciousness of the unions. As long as most journeymen kept one foot in the republic of the streets and taverns, there would always be important tensions between the most committed union organizers and those they helped to lead. The boisterous culture of gangs sometimes intersected and paralleled the world of the unions.

Journeymen and apprentices were the most notorious gang members. The diverse social life of the workshops bred a variety of journeymen’s associations and clubs. The rudest of these groups were the gangs of the younger journeymen and apprentices that roamed the streets after work and on Sundays. The gangs got their names from either the neighborhoods in which they lived or by their trade. For example, the butcher’s gang

was known as the Hide Binders. “The gangs were an insular lot, who found a rough collective prestige in mimicking the styles of the city’s affluent dandies, and ‘bloods’ attending theatricals, ogling young women, and picking fights with other gangs or immigrant day laborers” (Wilentz 55). Outside of the workshops, gangs enjoyed a plethora of leisure activities. This was a world of masculine bravado, and noisome entertainments.

Wilentz goes on to state that the political parties were always on the lookout for ways to increase their votes by tapping into resources of popular organization such as fire companies. The battles between fire companies were legendary. The gangs were also able to make political connections with local party saloonkeepers. When the results of an election were in doubt, saloonkeepers would rally up gang members and send them to the poles to take stern measures. Gangs would either steal the ballot boxes or destroy the polling booths.

During the 1830’s the gangs of New York had gotten so out of hand, that journalists bewailed the onset of an American “reign of terror” (Wilentz 256). The gangs headed into the 1830’s were better organized and more willing to use violence than ever before. The most famous gang at the time, the Chichester Gang, was the first to stick together over a long period of time, with an intricate organization of adult leaders and younger troops. These organized groups had their own uniforms and weapons, turning the pride and mastery of turf into rougher and threatening sport. For the most part gangs were concerned with private vendettas and the protection of street honor, however they also found their own public duties. Some members would serve as informal

neighborhood constabularies: members stood out on street corners with a watchful eye, making sure anyone who was unfamiliar was not causing any trouble.

Wilentz focuses on the gangs' contributions to the formation of a new social class. Gangs had a very important role in facilitating an important era in New York City's history, the rising sense of class consciousness during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Serving as an extension of the unions, gangs significantly aided the development of the emerging city of New York.

*Section II: Five Points: The 19<sup>th</sup> Century New York City Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum, Tyler Anbinder*

Tyler Anbinder argues that despite the harsh conditions of the Five Points, Irish immigrants coming from famine and poverty were able to make a home for themselves in the slum neighborhood. He goes on to argue that Five Points was not as bad as historians have made it out to be. Gangs created a unique subculture and got involved in politics in order to survive. Although it was unappealing to outsiders, the Five Points was a beacon of hope for many poor Irish immigrant gang members.

Through bare knuckle boxing matches, theatre and minstrel shows, tap dance, and the Bowery atmosphere, Anbinder argues that gangs paved the way for New York City nightlife and culture. Because of the Five Points' large Irish and Black population, interesting results were born out of the mixture of two different cultures. Today, America is defined by its diversity of peoples and cultures. In 19<sup>th</sup> century New York, on the other hand, nativist attitudes looked down upon immigrants flooding the country with their new

religions and cultures. Gangs were largely responsible for the beginnings of the mixing of cultures which represent present day America.

*Section 3: Gotham: A History of New York to 1898, Edwin Burrows and Mike Wallace*

Burrows and Wallace highlight many of the points about gangs that Wilentz and Anbinder focus on. Their book, *Gotham*, covers New York City's history from the 1600's to the late 1800's and therefore goes into less detail about the gangs than Wilentz and Anbinder. However, Burrows and Wallace offer a very interesting insight about the darker side of the gangs. While Wilentz and Anbinder praise gangs for their roles in the formation of social and cultural classes, Burrows and Wallace focus on the violence and brutality that the gangs demonstrated, especially in the New York City Draft Riots of 1863. It is important not to forget that even though these gangs resorted to crime to survive in the horrible conditions of the Five Points, they committed many atrocities, violating human rights. During the Draft riots, gangs viciously beat down, hung and injured blacks throughout the neighborhood. They also burned down the black orphan asylum and destroyed various homes and buildings. There is a fine line between partaking in crime to survive and committing senseless violence against a specific ethnic group.

### **Chapter 3**

#### *Section I: Gangs and the Assertion of a Unique Subculture*

Gangs created a unique subculture to escape from the perils of living in Five Points. The numerous amusements and events attended by these gang members allowed them to separate themselves from common New Yorkers and establish an identity in their new homeland. Residents in search of a good time could find entertainment on virtually any block in the Five Points. The street most associated with entertainment however, was the Bowery. Unlike Broadway which was filled with fashionable shops, The Bowery was the cheaper side of New York. People who were unable to afford the services within the Bowery's shops could find an assortment of activities in the streets. Visitors to the Bowery were amazed by the variety of shops, amusements, and the diversity of other visitors. A number of features contributed to the carnival like atmosphere of the Bowery including street singers, musicians, jugglers and performers with various talents such as sword swallowing and plate spinning. Working class men from all over New York visited the Bowery, many of them known as the Bowery B'hoys, who enjoyed one of the most colorful subcultures in history. The B'hoys developed a unique style, always conscious of their appearance, and would dress to impress. "[The Bowery B'hoy] wore a black silk hat, smoothly brushed, sitting precisely upon the top of his head, hair well oiled, and lying closely to the skin, long in front, short behind cravat a-la sailor, with the shirt collar turned over it, vest of fancy silk, large flowers, black frock coat, no jewelry, except in a few instances, where the insignia of the engine company to which the wearer belongs, as a breastpin, black pants, one or two years behind the fashion, heavy boots, and a cigar about half smoked, in the left corner of the mouth, as nearly perpendicular as

it is possible to be got. He has a peculiar swing, not exactly a swagger, to his walk, but a swing, which nobody but a Bowery boy can imitate” (Anbinder 178). The B’hoys loved adventure, taking pride in their independence, doing whatever they pleased, and felt most at home on the Bowery. According to Cornelius Matthews, author of *A Pen and Ink Panorama of New York City*, the Bowery B’hoys were working men, usually apprentices in butcher shops, stout clerks in jobbing-houses or junior partners in groceries, which were all trades dominated by native born workers. A self described B’hoys, John Ripley confirms that the Bowery B’hoys were primarily American-born, stating: “I was at that time what was known as a ‘Bowery Boy’, a distinct gang from either the ‘know nothing’ or ‘Native American’ parties. The gangs had no regular organization, but were a crowd of young men of different nationalities, mostly American born, who were always ready for excitement” (Anbinder 180). Because ninety percent of the Five Points’ residents were foreign born by 1855, it appears unlikely that this subculture appealed primarily to the native born. Through their dress and pizzazz these gang members sought to separate themselves from mainstream New Yorkers. Their flamboyant outfits and attitudes purposely stood out. The b’hoys went as far to create their own “flash talk” or slang phrases, inventing terms such as “kick the bucket” and “so long” (Burrows and Wallace 753).

This youth culture fashioned its self-image only after working hours. By day these gang members were ordinary working class men, but by night they transformed themselves completely. Not only did they want to dress and act differently to mock the affluent New Yorkers they also wanted to create a unique identity for themselves. Because it was so hard for them to advance and show their skills in the workplace, after

hours time spent in taverns or on the streets was a chance for gangs to flaunt their other talents.

The Bowery B'hoy phenomenon was recognized only in the late 1840's and virtually extinct by the Civil War, however was replaced by a second subculture in the Five Points, that of the "sporting men." Bowery B'hoys were working class men whereas sporting men spent their time working in a different way, gambling, drinking and fighting in saloons. Sporting men usually supported themselves by working as bouncers for clubs, boxers, or teaching others to fight. Sporting clubs and saloons were opened up throughout the Five Points, as well as the publication of sporting newspapers.

Illegal bare knuckle prize fights were perhaps the most attractive event for these sporting men. They displayed their skills of gambling and demonstrated their courageous willingness to lose it all. "Prize fighting expressed a distinctive working class ethos that inverted the dominant Victorian middle-class assumptions about money, gender and violence" (Gorn 316). These matches of brute strength lasted hundreds of rounds and did not attract the upper classes for the most part. The combatants were likely to be gang members and have political ties. Boxing was more than a thrilling diversion, for many it provided an opportunity to get themselves out of poverty (Burrows and Wallace 756). A tough guy who battled his way to the top was able to earn respect, which quickly became a powerful tool in Five Points' elections. The more popular you were, and the more people you could get to vote in your favor, the more political clout you would obtain.

Theater was also a popular source of entertainment for gang members. It not only served as entertainment, but as a way for gangs to vent their frustrations and feelings. Gangs loved nothing more than to boo and hiss at actors on stage. It was not rare for a

night at the theater to end up in an all out brawl. The Astor Place Opera House riot of 1849 resulted in the death of eighteen people. English actor William Macready's portrayal of Macbeth did not please the Irish audience and he was driven off stage. When Macready was set to return to the stage the following night, gang members on the Bowery bought up all the tickets and started a violent riot. Unable to control the rioting gang mobs, the National Guard was forced to step in to quell the uprising.

Minstrel performances were also a major attraction for gangs. The most famous black face performer was Thomas Dartmouth Rice. Rice was born in the Seventh Ward in 1808. Moving out west, Rice worked as a stagehand throughout the Mississippi Valley. In 1828, Rice met a slave by the name of Jim Crow who did an odd shuffling dance. Rice copied the slaves style, attitude and dress and created a routine that he later performed throughout clubs in New York (Burrows and Wallace 489). These performances illustrated extreme stereotypes of blacks. Although there were more blacks in the Five Points than anywhere else in the city, this form of racist ridicule demonstrated the mentality that slavery was right and natural. To the gangs and other Irish immigrants, these negative images of blackness created a sense of pride of being white. In the eyes of native New Yorkers, the Irish were almost as bad as the blacks. These minstrel shows were believed by the Irish to elevate themselves in status, granting them superiority over the blacks.

Dance Halls were made famous in the Five Points, and served as prime after hour's entertainment for gang members. The Irish brought their own styles of dance such as the jig to America. The African Americans in Five Points also had their own styles of dance such as the shuffle. The combination of the Irish jig and Black shuffle resulted in

what we know today as tap dance. William Henry Lane, popularly known throughout the Five Points as Master Juba, was responsible for making tap dance a worldwide phenomenon (Anbinder 173).

The Bowery B'hoys, sporting men, and other gangs developed this unique subculture to escape from the affliction of every day life in the Five Points. The gangs of nineteenth century New York were not ignorant thugs, but masters of a rich subculture and conscientious political strategists. The influence they had over politics not only swayed the votes of elections and primaries, but allowed the gangs and its members to climb the political ladder, launching many to success.

## Section II: Gangs and Politics

The political parties were always on the lookout for a way to increase their power by obtaining more voters. Political power was held by four main groups in the Five Points: saloon keepers, grocers, policemen, and firemen. The groups had a unique ability to influence voters.

The most respected men in the Five Points were saloon keepers. Nobody in the entire neighborhood saw voters more frequently. Saloon keepers could be trusted and served as the gateway through which the common voter could learn news of city politics. Large numbers of voters confided in and paid gratitude to their bartenders, a gratitude that could be repaid as votes on Election Day. Similar to saloon keepers, grocers in the Five Points sold little more than alcohol and were vital for political advancement.

Politicians reserved jobs in the police department for young men who had been loyal to their party in previous campaigns. In return for such a high paying and secure job, the police officer was expected to contribute a portion of his salary to the party and use his influence to assist party members who got in trouble with the law. Policemen served valuable services to the political party, and as a result were able to quickly rise out of the ranks to both party leadership and elective office.

Volunteer fire companies also served as an avenue to political prominence. A fire company was as likely to show up in full force to support a particular election as to extinguish a fire. Because intimidation was such an important weapon in Five Point politics, the bare knuckle fighters of the sixth ward's fire companies frequently determined the outcome of a primary or election, often by fighting with a competing fire

company. Most Five Points politicians came to political prominence through the fire companies, such as “Boss” William Tweed.

Few Five Pointers managed to obtain political power without first working in the Police or Fire departments or owning their own saloon. “A Five Pointer might approach a neighborhood political leader and offer the services of his gang to intimidate the leader’s opponents on Election Day” (Anbinder 147). In return for their services many gangs would demand money, but the politically ambitious sought patronage. Those who could not advance politically through saloons, police, or fire departments, received jobs with the local, state or federal government for themselves or for their allies, in return for their gang’s services. The politician who could deliver jobs to his supporters was in the best position to increase his strength. This was an effective way to gain political “muscle” through gangs, and a large number of voters, since steady work was hard to come by in the Five Points. “In a tight race the ‘boys’ might be summoned to serve as ‘sluggers’ to vote as often as they could: when the results of a particular election district were in doubt, the publicans sent the gangs down to take sterner measures, stealing ballot boxes and destroying poll booths” (Wilentz 262). The gangs and the politicians in Five Points formed a close relationship which favored both groups in different ways. For the politicians, the gangs were a way to stay in power. For the gangs, politicians allowed them to obtain significant control over New York’s political machine. In some cases, the lines between politician and gang member would become blurred, as in the cases of Isaiah Rynders and Mike Walsh.

### Section III: Rynders and Walsh: Gang Leaders or Politicians?

Gang leaders were able to accumulate great political success. Two men in particular, Isaiah Rynders and Mike Walsh, were such powerful members of the urban street culture, that they were able to manipulate the New York City political machine and even determine the outcome of a presidential election and in Walsh's case become a member of the House of Representatives.

Isaiah Rynders was perhaps one of the most famous of the sporting men and was able to achieve great political success through his gang, the Empire Club. It was not Rynders' ability to fight that made him famous, but his ability to lead fighters that skyrocketed him to success in the 1840's. Rynders was nicknamed The Captain, a title he earned while commanding a Hudson River ship, before heading out west and becoming a celebrated gambler and knife fighter, working on the Mississippi River steamboats (Burrows and Wallace 635). Rynders established the Empire Club, a collection of muscular bruisers and prize fighters, to rally voters in favor of the Democratic Party, and attempted to turn the Five Points into his personal political fiefdom. To increase his political clout, Rynders opened up a half dozen groceries and saloons along the Bowery by the late 1830's. Rynders also facilitated some of the largest riots in New York City's history, including the Astor Place Opera House Riot of 1849 which resulted in the death of eighteen people. Rynders and his crew were directly involved with buying up all the tickets to the theatre show and distributing them specifically to gang members who planned to cause chaos. Rynders' most significant accomplishment however, was his power in the realm of politics, being able to sway votes in his party's favor.

The tight presidential race of 1844 between Democratic candidate James K. Polk and Whig Henry Clay, was believed by many to be decided by the New York electoral vote. Rynders and his gang of fighters used intimidation and outright violence to prevent voters from casting their ballots in favor of the Whig candidate. Close to five hundred thousand votes were cast on Election Day, and New York's vote was swung in Polk's favor by only five thousand votes. If not for Rynders and the Empire Club it is likely that Polk would have lost the presidential race, demonstrating the immense power gangs had over politics. In return for getting him elected to office, Polk offered Rynders a lucrative no-show job, allowing him to fully devote his time to gambling and politics. The Empire Club was feared both inside and outside of the Democratic Party. For years, Rynders and his gang influenced elections and disrupted primaries and other political gatherings. Not only did they get people to vote for the Democratic Party, but they also prevented Whig supporters, brought in from outside of New York, from voting by using threats and brutal violence against them. Known for his ability to quote passages from Scripture and Shakespeare from memory, Rynders was certainly not an ignorant, brutish thug. By mid-century politicians made sure to gain the support of Rynders before campaigning.

Rynders was not the only gang leader to attain political prowess. Mike Walsh, a flamboyant Irish immigrant and leader of the Spartan Association was dominant in Five Points' politics, eventually becoming a U.S. Representative. The Spartan Association was founded in 1840 and was a mixture of an Irish secret society, a political gang, and a workingman's club. Walsh was famous for directing his supporters to overrun Tammany meetings. Once inside, Walsh's men would chant his name and urge him to speak to the crowd. Walsh would fire up crowds with his cocky tirades and rants, perfecting the craft

of using the mob as a powerful political tool. “In his restless search for a political voice and public persona, Walsh came to embody a new and curious figure in New York politics, the radical Bowery Boy politician. His use of force was perfectly in keeping with the roughhouse standards of the 1840’s. If anything it was exceeded by that of the regular party gangs like Rynder’s Empire Club” (Wilentz 329). Furious over Tammany Hall’s refusal to give the Spartan Association an independent voice within the party, Walsh ran for Congress and drew enough votes away from the Tammany nominee to elect the Whig. In 1842 the Spartans went so far as to take over the Tammany nominating convention temporarily, allowing them to name their own candidates for office. Tammany finally gave up in 1846 and nominated Walsh as a regular candidate for the state assembly. “Walsh like Tammany but with different rhetoric, and without elite directors, assembled disparate groups of lower class New Yorkers in a new radical coalition, dedicated both to advancing his own political fortunes and to social reform” (Wilentz 329). The fact that an Irish immigrant gang leader could become a U.S. Representative, demonstrates the control and ability for gangs to manipulate politics.

Section IV: The Civil War Draft Riots of 1863.

The Civil War Draft Riots of 1863 represents the culmination of gang involvement in New York City subculture and politics. Throughout the early to mid nineteenth century, gangs struggled to survive in a city where native New Yorker's believed they had no right to be in the first place. This nativist attitude of the Irish and other immigrants being toxic to America made it very difficult for the gangs to establish an identity for themselves. Just as the gangs were beginning to create some sense of control for themselves in New York, through subculture and politics, the Civil War Draft forced them to abandon their success and fight for a cause for which they did not believe. The mentality gang members had was that if the blacks were freed, job competition would become even fiercer. Their political success was being overshadowed by this rise in power that the blacks were beginning to obtain. This led to frustration, and ultimately severe violence against the black community in Five Points. Paying an incredible fee of three hundred dollars was the only way to avoid the draft, creating even more frustration against the rich who bought their way out of conscription. Gangs and other whites of the working class compared their value unfavorably to that of southern slaves, stating that "[we] are sold for three hundred dollars, whilst they pay one thousand dollars for Negroes" (Harris 279). The bloody Draft Riots began on the morning of July 13, 1863, and lasted for five dreadful days. The scars created by the riots against the black community lasted long after the chaos was over. "The segment of New York's population which had suffered the most from the Draft Riots, the Negroes, did not feel comfortable in the city for more than a decade after the Civil War. Their old neighborhoods lay deserted, for the persecuted blacks were reluctant to live again in

places where such grievous harm had been done to them” (Werstein 249). The gangs resorted to brutal violence to maintain the control they fought so hard to obtain.

## **Chapter 4**

### *Section I: Limitations of Thesis*

The gangs of New York, through a unique subculture and political clout, proved themselves to be more than just ignorant, brutish thugs, committing violence for the sake of violence. However, this does not mean that they were an innocent group of mischief makers. In fact, crimes and vices committed by these groups were often of a heinous nature, and violated human rights. In fact, the rituals and practices of these gangs formed the foundations for modern day Organized Crime. Prominent Mafia members of the bootlegging era during the 1920's grew out of Five Points' gangs, including Al Capone, Lucky Luciano, and Johnny Torrio. The codes of honor and respect illustrated by nineteenth century gangs would emulate the later organized crime syndicates.

Crimes such as destroying polling booths and harming voters were aimed for a specific political purpose. However, the gangs of New York also committed senseless violence against rival gangs, for the preservation of turf and honor. Sean Wilentz writes about a particular gang member, David Bruce, who traveled with the Old Slippers, a gang of bookbinders and printers. Bruce recalled when he and a friend had been grabbed by two watermen from the White Hallers gang, and covered with molasses and sand. Court records include accounts of bands of young mechanics that sailed into crowds of dockworkers and passerby, with no other apparent purpose than to start a brawl. A primitive justice governed their set-tos. Bruce thought it a mean thing for his assailants to pick on him and his friend, but gangs betrayed little concern for any matters more monumental than protecting their street honor or proving their courage (Wilentz 56).

Crimes committed by gang members were often of a heinous nature, including the atrocities during the Civil War Draft Riot of 1863, where blacks were beaten and hung to death. Gangs burned down buildings, razed homes to the ground, and destroyed families. Their victims were targeted brutally, despite their age. Rioters attacked a nine year old black child who was selling fruit on the corner of Broadway and Chambers street before burning down the Colored Orphan Asylum on Fifth Avenue (Harris 282).

Many gangs focused on criminal activities rather than subculture and politics. According to Burrows and Wallace, Five Points' gangs were involved in a number of different criminal activities that terrorized New York City residents. "Amusers" used snuff or peppers to blind and rob helpless victims. "Anglers" stole from store windows. A "Badger" is one who robs a man's pocket after he's been enticed into bed with a woman (Burrows & Wallace 756). Some gangs hung around the docks, preying on ships, becoming river pirates. The Day Break Boys, for example, would gather their members and row out to ships along the shore. They would rob ships of their cargo and sell it to fences on land. "Between 1850 and 1852, it was claimed, that the Daybreak Boys stole a hundred thousand dollars in property" (Burrows & Wallace 757). The objectives of these gangs were far different than those of the gangs who used violence and intimidation for survival purposes.

It can also be argued that the gangs of nineteenth century New York served as the foundation for the future of organized crime in America. In fact, Al Capone, Lucky Luciano, Johnny Torrio and other notable organized crime figures were born out of Five Points' gangs and thrived during the bootlegging period in the 1920's. Gangs had similar values of loyalty and trust within their ranks as modern organized crime syndicates

possessed. The variety of criminal ventures in which gangs were involved in were also similar to the activities of organized crime groups. For example, “Tammany gang leaders such as Isaiah Rynders and Thomas Hyer levied tribute from brothels, saloons, and gambling dens and in return extended them protection,” a tactic frequently used by modern day organized crime groups (Burrows & Wallace 807). Prostitution was also a major criminal venture taken on by gangs that eventually influenced the world of organized crime.

It is evident that gangs resorted to crime and vice to survive the difficulty of living in such harsh conditions. However, the gangs also had a dark side to them, and committed random violence for the sake of violence. Senseless violence terrorized residents of their neighborhoods, and they committed atrocities which violated human rights as witnessed in the Civil War Draft Riots of 1863. They were also similar in structure and organization as many modern day organized crime groups suggesting that they created a foundation for this criminal phenomenon.

## **Chapter Five**

The gangs of New York played a significant role in a dark period of New York City's history that is overlooked by many scholars. Gangs created a unique subculture and manipulated politics in order to survive in a country where the native population didn't think they had a right to live in. They involved themselves in many forms of entertainment to escape from the hardships of everyday life including bare knuckle boxing, theater, minstrelsy, and dancing. Their dress and attitude reflected their desire to establish an identity for themselves in their new homeland of America as well as to separate themselves from the traditional native New Yorker. They manipulated the political machine and formed special relationships with politicians to maintain some sense of control in a new environment which they were unfamiliar with. The crimes and vices undertaken by these gangs were a rational response to their environment and their status in New York City. Although they ruled the streets almost two hundred years ago, the subculture of the gangs of New York are still echoed today. Despite the corruption and violence, these gangs were largely responsible for the foundation of the world's greatest and most prestigious city, New York.

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