

Gangs of New York: Fact or Fiction?

"Gangs of New York": Fact vs. Fiction

by Ted Chamberlain
for National Geographic News
Updated March 24, 2003



Mayhem rules in this perhaps stereotypical view of the Five Points intersection. Printed in 1859, this lithograph was one of many included in *D.T. Valentine's Manual*, a once annual compendium of New York City views. —Lithograph from CORBIS

Nominated for the Best Picture Oscar at the 2003 Academy Awards, director Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York* brings to life 19th-century Manhattan's Five Points neighborhood. But what was it really like to live in what was once the world's most notorious slum?

Good-time girls swing from rafters in oversize canary cages, sword-slashing mobs rule the streets, and murder lurks in every corner. This is Manhattan's infamous Five Points slum, inhabited by Leonardo DiCaprio, Cameron Diaz, and Daniel Day-Lewis in Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York*. But is it the real Five Points?

Digging through layers of sediment and stacks of records, archaeologists and historians are unearthing a truer, though no less compelling, picture of the neighborhood Charles Dickens called "a world of vice and misery."

When Dickens reported on Five Points in 1842, the neighborhood was on the edge of an explosion. Spurred on by the Irish Potato Famine of the 1840s, waves of threadbare immigrants arrived in New York City with the wherewithal for only the most miserable lodgings—the drooping tenements of Five Points.

For the next two decades, the Irish ruled Five Points, overcrowding a roughly five-square-block area centered on the intersection of Cross Street (today's Park Street), Anthony Street (today's Worth), and Orange Street (today's Baxter).

In Five Points tenements, families and other groups lived crammed into one or two dark rooms. The outhouses were too few and often overflowing. Sewage and pigs ran in the streets. "The whole neighborhood just stank," says historian Tyler Anbinder, who wrote the book *Five Points* and reviewed the *Gangs* script for Scorsese.

Some holding camphor-soaked kerchiefs to their noses to ward off the stench, middle-class tourists would go "slumming" in Five Points—escorted by police—to see if the lurid tales given by reporters and missionaries were true.

"Five Points," wrote one Methodist reformer, had become "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."

Much of what was written in newspapers, tracts, and books, says archaeologist Rebecca Yamin, was colored by religious zeal, a desire to sell papers, or plain-old fear. "Middle-class outsiders looked at this neighborhood that was teeming with activity and street people selling food, and it was frightening. They just looked from the outside and assumed it was all very bad."

Exhuming Five Points

Yamin has as clear a view of tenement life as anyone. From 1992 to 1998, she led the team that analyzed 850,000 pieces of the Five Points puzzle—artifacts unearthed during the construction of a federal courthouse in what used to be Five Points. Housed at the World Trade Center, nearly the entire collection was destroyed on 9/11, but not before it had been inventoried for posterity.

Taken together, the artifacts and historical records paint a picture of hard-working immigrants trying to make the best of a bad situation, and to make a home of a hovel. "They were doing what they could do for their families to live respectably," Yamin says. "They had ornaments on their mantels and pictures on their walls and teapots and teacups, and they were eating very well."

Even here, meat was often on the table three times a day, animal remains and historical accounts show.

"In the Scorsese movie you have these scenes in a basement where there are skulls in the corners and people are draped in rags," Yamin says. "We didn't see anything to suggest that people were living like that. There were certainly no skulls rolling around in people's rooms." And few pewter cups, for that matter.

Watching the movie, Yamin says, "the thing I really noticed was those pewter mugs everyone was drinking out of. Well, they stopped drinking out of those in the 18th century."

Yamin recalls showing movie researchers, who visited her team to research period furnishings, the little glass tumblers Five Pointers drank from. Laughing, she says, "In other words, they didn't learn anything from us."

Historian Anbinder agrees with Yamin's appraisal of Five Pointers: "Most of them had real, legal jobs." Many were shoemakers, tailors, masons, grocers, cigarmakers, liquor dealers, and laborers.

"They were saving money, trying to improve their lives and bring loved ones over from Europe." But, he adds, "some of the hard-to-believe stereotypes are true."

"Every House a Brothel"

"Every house was a brothel, and every brothel a hell," wrote Five Points missionary Lewis Pease. *New York Tribune* reporter George Foster added in 1850, "It is no unusual thing for a mother and her two or three daughters—all of course prostitutes—to receive their 'men' at the same time in the same room."

Their claims aren't so far-fetched, though children seldom worked as prostitutes. In *Five Points*, Anbinder writes, police records reveal that, "for the blocks radiating from the Five Points intersection, nearly every building *did* house a brothel" in the 1840s and '50s.

The Real Gangs of New York

Scorsese based his movie on Herbert Asbury's 1927 book *The Gangs of New York*. But the names of the legendary Five Points gangs—the Bowery Boys ([see photo](#)), the Dead Rabbits, the Plug Uglies, the Short Tails, the Slaughter Houses, the Swamp Angels—may be among the few things that Asbury, who did little original research, got right, according to historians.

The perception of Five Points as an unrelievedly dangerous place is exaggerated, Anbinder says. "I looked at the statistics, and other than public drunkenness and prostitution, there was no more crime in Five Points than in any other part of the city."

"The book *The Gangs of New York* says there was one tenement where there was a murder a day. At the period of time he was writing about, there was barely a murder a month in all of New York City," Anbinder says.

Writing in the Al Capone era, Asbury interpreted the Five Points gangs as the precursors of 1920s organized-crime mobs, Anbinder says. Scorsese, the director of Mafia classics such as *Goodfellas* and *Mean Streets*, seizes on this idea in *Gangs*. "That's one of the big problems with the movie," Anbinder says.

In fact, gangs like the Dead Rabbits and Bowery Boys were political clubs that met at nights and on weekends to promote their candidates. "They would fight at the polls and sometimes beat up their opponents, but not just for fun or plunder," Anbinder says.

So why fight? Nearly every scuffle was designed to help a gang's chosen candidate into public office. Once there, the candidate would reciprocate, bestowing good, steady-paying patronage jobs and municipal funds on his constituency.

Anbinder also faults the movie for its emphasis on Catholic-Protestant conflict. Most fighting was among gangs of Irish-Catholic Five Pointers. And it was rarely as bloody or deadly as in the movie. "Rioters did not go about with swords and broadaxes. Every once in a while one person would have one, but never whole mobs armed like that."

Resurrecting Five Points for the Screen

In the post-Civil War period, the Irish gangs' efforts on behalf of political candidates were paying off. Now with more say in the halls of government and better livelihoods, the Irish gladly ceded Five Points to new nations of strivers, mostly Italians and Chinese. But the squalor stayed on.

Reconstructing Five Points and other Manhattan locales from scratch at a Rome studio, *Gangs of New York* production designer Dante Ferretti was determined to get that squalor—and the rest of the slum—just right.

Working from archival photographs, records, and illustrations, Ferretti says he "built everything as the original buildings were built—in brick, stone, cobblestones, and wood—not like in *Gladiator* or *Lord of the Rings* or other movies where they use a lot of digital effects."

Though accurate in terms of size and materials, the new Five Points was just that at first—too new. "I had a special crew for aging everything with plaster, paint, patinas," Ferretti says. "A really huge, huge job." In the end, he says, "everything was correct."

As proof of authenticity, Ferretti says, "In the movie you see many scenes that are like Jacob Riis pictures."

The Fall of Five Points

In the 1890s crusading photographer Jacob Riis's unprecedented images of crowded tenements, child laborers, and places like Bandit's Roost ([see photo](#)) incited a public outcry that led the city to raze Mulberry Bend, Five Points' most notorious block.

Its heart cut out, the slum was overtaken by neighborhoods to the north—Little Italy and Chinatown. Courthouses and factories replaced its southern tenements.

Today the Five Points intersection is buried largely beneath Chinatown's Columbus Park and a federal courthouse.

Though historian Tyler Anbinder has quibbles with *Gangs of New York's* Five Points, he gives the film points for overall accuracy.

"The overall theme of the movie Scorsese gets exactly right: When the Irish first came to America they were persecuted and they literally did have to fight for their fair share of what America had to offer," Anbinder says.

And as they say, it's only a movie. "Scorsese knows much more history than is portrayed in the movie," Anbinder says. "He wanted to make a dramatic statement, he didn't want to make a documentary."



Around 1888, men gather in an alley called Bandit's Roost in Manhattan's Five Points neighborhood, the setting of the movie *Gangs of New York*. This and other Jacob Riis photographs inspired the city to raze the notorious Mulberry Bend block—and Bandit's Roost with it. *Photograph by Jacob Riis from Bettmann/CORBIS*