H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Five Points Archaeological Project Web Site. Rebecca Yamin, project director.

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Published on H-Urban (September, 1997)

New York's Five Points, the most infamous slum in nineteenth-century America, has been described by historian Daniel Czitrom as "very likely the most thoroughly chronicled neighborhood in the United States." Located just a few blocks north and east of City Hall, at what is now the southern edge of Chinatown, the Five Points took its name from the five corners formed by the intersection of three streets: Orange (now Baxter), Cross (later Park and now Mosco), and Anthony (now Worth, which originally terminated at this intersection and thus made five rather than six corners). Beginning with Charles Dickens in the early 1840s, virtually every writer visiting New York ventured into the Five Points to chronicle its mysteries and miseries. Authors as diverse as Lydia Maria Child, Nathaniel P. Willis, Richard Henry Dana, Fredrika Bremer, and Ned Buntline wrote vivid descriptions of the area. Dozens of lesser-known writers, as well as countless anonymous newspaper reporters, also penned lurid sketches of its most notorious haunts, including the Old Brewery tenement, Cow Bay, and Pete Williams' dance hall. <p> These writers often used the Five Points to prove the superiority of their own societies. Dickens, for example, clearly hoped to show in his <cite>American Notes</cite> that the United States was producing poverty far worse than that in England. In order to demonstrate the advantages of the Southern labor system, Kentuckian William A. Caruthers boasted that Five Pointers were "far more filthy, degraded, and wretched than any slave I have ever beheld, under the most cruel and tyrannical master." Protestant missionaries likewise used eyewitness accounts of Five Points vice and drunkenness in their efforts to convince the world of the superiority of Protestant enlightenment and restraint to Catholic "ignorance and superstition." <p> Despite the abundance of contemporary descriptions of the Five Points, scholars have written relatively little about this famous neighborhood. With the exception of Carol Groneman's nearly thirty year-old Ph.D. dissertation ("The 'Bloody Ould Sixth': A Social Analysis of a New York City Working Class Community in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," Ph.D. diss., U. of Rochester, 1973), virtually nothing significant has been written about this community whose very mention once filled New Yorkers with dread. Groneman's dissertation, while very well done, is primarily an analysis of the 1855 New York State census for the area and as such only whets one's appetite for a fuller understanding of this place described by an 1853 magazine as 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." The Five Points is mentioned in the work of other historians, most notably Tim Gilfoyle, Richard Stott, Edward K. Spann, and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, but not in enough detail to give a modern reader a full understanding of its many nuances. Recently, however, the Five Points has played a prominent role in non-academic works such as Luc Sante's <cite>Low Life</cite> and especially Caleb Carr's <cite>The Alienist</cite>, which has increased public interest in the famous slum. <p> Perhaps one of the reasons scholars have been reluctant to write the history of the Five Points is that they apparently had little to work with other than the bigotry-laden accounts of Protestant missionaries and sensation-seeking newspaper reporters. The census, as Groneman demonstrated, could be used to refute the neighborhood stereotypes in certain areas, but so much of its history seemed irretrievable. Luckily for those interested in urban history, New York's overburdened court system led federal officials to build yet another courthouse in lower Manhattan in the area around Foley Square. The site chosen was the city block that made up the south-east point

of the Five Points. Thanks to far-sighted federal legislation, the construction project included funding for an archaeological dig in the area before the courthouse could be erected. Beginning their excavations in 1991, the archaeologists unearthed approximately 850,000 artifacts, mostly shards and scraps, but also hundreds of fascinating objects that provide a unique glimpse into antebellum Five Points life. Thanks to Dr. Rebecca Yamin, director of the project, scholars who were aware of the Five Points dig have been able to visit the archaeologists' offices in the basement of the World Trade Center and view some of the objects they uncovered. Thanks to the world-wide web, anyone can learn about the archaeologists findings, as the General Services Administration has created a web site that describes the project's origins, the history of the Five Points, and reproduces photographs of more than one hundred of the objects uncovered during the dig. <p> The main strength of the Five Points web site <http://r2.gsa.gov/fivept/fphome.htm$>$ is its images–of the archaeological dig and its various "features," of historical prints and photographs of the Five Ponts and tenement dwellers, and of the artifacts themselves. Consequently, it makes little sense to use a text-only browser such as Lynx to gain access to the site. Images presented include the best-known depictions of antebellum Five Points, such as "Five Points in 1827" from the <cite>Manual of the Corporation of the City of New York</cite> of 1855, as well as images of saloons and tenements from <cite>Harper's Weekly and <cite>Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper</cite>. The site's creators also include an excellent selection of maps, including an 1857 insurance map color-coded to indicate the type of building on each lot and another detailing the location of the "Collect" pond over which the Five Points was built. <p> The most fascinating images, though, are the artifacts themselves. These are grouped in five categories: the Pearl Street Tanneries, the Hoffmans (well-to-do bakers), the Irish Tenement and Saloon, A Chatham Street Oyster House, and a miscellaneous section called "From Needle Trades to Street Musicians." Among the most interesting is a set of monkey bones, probably the remains of a monkey used by Italian organ grinders to collect money from their audiences. A lice comb reminds us that the contemporary descriptions of filth in these tenements were often accurate. The many chamber pots found by the archaeologists reflect the inconveniences of life before indoor plumbing. The hundreds of clay pipes unearthed in the project (a sample of which are reproduced at the site) demonstrate that artists' ubiquitous depictions of Irish-Americans with pipes in their mouths may not have been an exaggeration. Those who are not of an archaeological bent may find the dozens of bottles and cups a bit repetitious. One must admire the tenacity of the archaeologists involved in this part of the project, however, as they have identified the manufacturer and country of origin of virtually every one of them. <p> Having visited the offices of these archaeologists at the World Trade Center, I know there are some other artifacts which might have been included in the web site rather than so many bottles and cups. One is a "nursing cup," a device women who are breast-feeding their babies use to protect their tender nipples. I have heard that one of the archaeologists has given a lecture on toys found at the site, but other than a few marbles these are not displayed at the web site either. The archaeologists also found, but did not include in the web site, some items with Hebrew lettering on them, possibly used to bind bunches of cloth used in the garment industry. <p> This raises the question of what else might be missing from the site. Because the focus is on the artifacts, only the briefest description of the history of the Five Points is provided. Although there is a picture of the "Old Brewery," there is no description of its significance, so only experts on New York City history who browse the site will know that this was the most infamous tenement of the antebellum period. The Five Points was also a truly multi-ethnic neighborhood, with the city's highest concentrations of blacks, Irish, Jews, Chinese, and Italians at various points in its history. Yet the site does not describe this in any detail (the "Who lived at the Five Points" page merely states that it was a "working-class neighborhood"). Having met many of the archaeologists involved in the project, I know that they know these things, but leaving it out of the web site means that those who visit it must be aware of these facts beforehand to get the most out of the site. The web site's creators plan eventually to put their detailed census information about the block into the web site, and this may help those who visit the site better understand the Five Points' ethnic composition. <p> According to the site's creators, "the archaeological remains of hard work and industry stand in stark contrast to contemporary descriptions of Five Points, which were blatantly biased." This is the overall theme of the web site. As someone who is now at work on a book-length study of the Five Points, I have two reactions to this statement. First, the archaeologists are absolutely right that contemporaries generally described only the bad and none of the good in the Five Points. But not all contemporaries were so biased that their observations are rendered completely useless. Some like Lewis Pease (the director of the Five Points House of Industry) and Charles Loring Brace

(founder of the Children's Aid Society) had real sympathy for the Five Pointers, and their observations are valuable despite their prejudices. Secondly, the sheer number of horrifying stories about the Five Points leads one who carefully studies its history to conclude that there really <cite>were</cite> some horrible things going on there that cannot simply be dismissed as imaginative creations of bigoted observers. There were parents who allowed their children to go hungry while spending their last pennies on liquor. There were madams who hired young girls to do housework but then forced them into prostitution, locking them into rooms with their customers until the girls had lost their virginity and their customers had paid their ten dollars. There were families so destitute that they had to burn their only furniture and bedding to keep warm in the winter and could only eat on alternate days. There were basement tenement apartments whose very walls oozed green and brown slime leaking from the outhouse vaults just a few feet away. The creators of the Five Points web site never say that these things did not occur, but, by emphasizing "hard work and industry" and not mentioning the seamier side of the Five Points, someone unfamiliar with the Five Points' reputation might leave the site with the assumption that everyone who lived there could afford imported ceramics and bottles of beer. <p> The Five Points thus was clearly a place of contrasts. Abject poverty was prevalent, but so too was the industry and hard work that allowed so many of its immigrant residents to improve their lives and move to more respectable parts of the city. The Five Points Archaeological Project web site contains reminders of both sides of life in this infamous slum, though it is especially valuable in documenting the positive side. Anyone interested in the material culture of the nineteenth century will find it a rewarding site to explore. High school and college students will also find the site interesting and informative, provided that they are given some background on its history, population, and reputation in advance. Finally, the site reminds us that archaeology is not simply a tool for studying the ancient world, but something of immense value even to those of us who study the not-so-distant past. <p>

Citation: Tyler Anbinder. Review of , *Five Points Archaeological Project Web Site*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. September, 1997.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14857