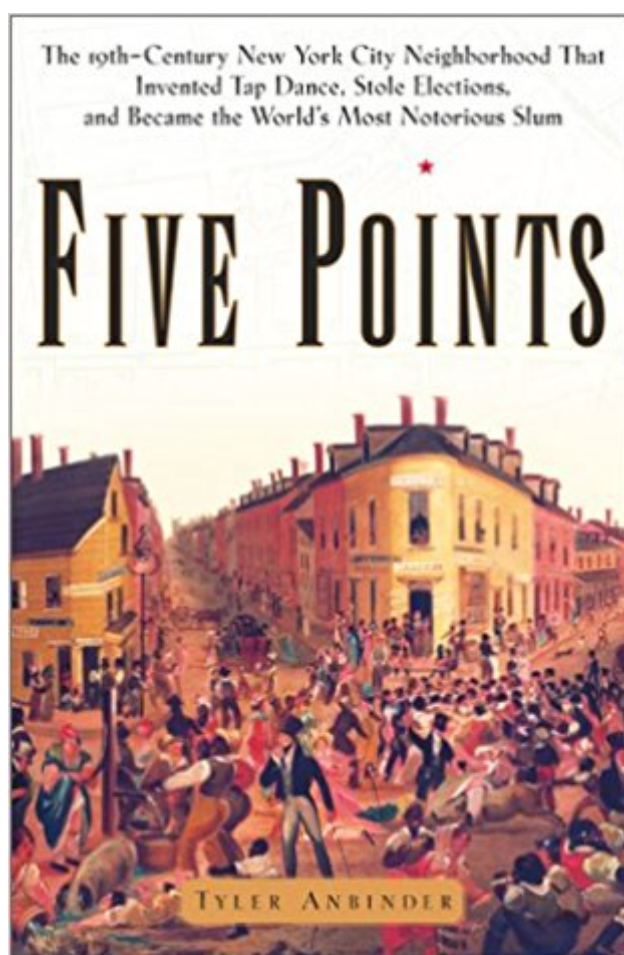


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# Five Points: The Nineteenth-Century New York City Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections And Became The World's Most Notorious Slum



## Synopsis

The very letters of the two words seem, as they are written, to redden with the blood-stains of unavenged crime. There is Murder in every syllable, and Want, Misery and Pestilence take startling form and crowd upon the imagination as the pen traces the words." So wrote a reporter about Five Points, the most infamous neighborhood in nineteenth-century America, the place where "slumming" was invented. All but forgotten today, Five Points was once renowned the world over. Its handful of streets in lower Manhattan featured America's most wretched poverty, shared by Irish, Jewish, German, Italian, Chinese, and African Americans. It was the scene of more riots, scams, saloons, brothels, and drunkenness than any other neighborhood in the new world. Yet it was also a font of creative energy, crammed full of cheap theaters and dance halls, prizefighters and machine politicians, and meeting halls for the political clubs that would come to dominate not just the city but an entire era in American politics. From Jacob Riis to Abraham Lincoln, Davy Crockett to Charles Dickens, Five Points both horrified and inspired everyone who saw it. The story that Anbinder tells is the classic tale of America's immigrant past, as successive waves of new arrivals fought for survival in a land that was as exciting as it was dangerous, as riotous as it was culturally rich. Tyler Anbinder offers the first-ever history of this now forgotten neighborhood, drawing on a wealth of research among letters and diaries, newspapers and bank records, police reports and archaeological digs. Beginning with the Irish potato-famine influx in the 1840s, and ending with the rise of Chinatown in the early twentieth century, he weaves unforgettable individual stories into a tapestry of tenements, work crews, leisure pursuits both licit and otherwise, and riots and political brawls that never seemed to let up. Although the intimate stories that fill Anbinder's narrative are heart-wrenching, they are perhaps not so shocking as they first appear. Almost all of us trace our roots to once humble stock. Five Points is, in short, a microcosm of America.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Though long ago bulldozed away and remade, the rough-and-tumble lower Manhattan district called Five Points was once considered to be so representative of New York that foreign journalists traveled there to gather horrifying stories for their readers. Wrote a Swedish reporter, "lower than to the Five Points it is not possible for human nature to sink." In his wide-ranging reconstruction of Five Points's few square blocks, historian Tyler Anbinder shows that that journalist was not far off the mark. "Dozens, perhaps even hundreds, of its residents lived in windowless, teeming apartments that were unfit for habitation," he writes. Alcoholism, violence, and prostitution were commonplace. Poverty was epidemic, and living conditions were so intolerable that the reforming sociologist Jacob Riis used the area as a case study for the wretched excesses of urban life. A corrupt city government kept the police at bay, making the neighborhood safe for a succession of crime lords but woefully dangerous for residents--most of whom, in time, would be newcomers from Ireland, Italy, Russia, and other faraway lands, as well as African Americans newly arrived from the South. "Locked into the lowest-paying occupations," as Anbinder writes, they labored, saved, and eventually moved on, making room for the next wave of immigrants. Five Points is gone, though a few of its streets remain, marking the edge of Chinatown. Anbinder's careful study brings it back to life. --Gregory McNamee

"H" `FIVE POINTS!... There is Murder in every syllable, and Want, Misery and Pestilence... crowd upon the imagination as the pen traces the words,' " bemoaned Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper in 1873. That's a lot to live down to, even in New York. Long ignored by academics, Five Points an internationally notorious intersection in what is now lower Manhattan's Chinatown that was the site of crime and poverty for most of the 19th century is now a hot topic in history, sociology and even pop fiction (much of Caleb Carr's bestselling *The Alienist* was set there). Anbinder, associate professor of history at George Washington University, delivers the best of these studies. His splendid book draws upon wide-ranging sources census lists, the logs of charitable organizations, police records, real estate registers, personal documents, news stories, reformers' reports to create a breathtaking overview of the extraordinary poverty and squalor in which the area's German, Jewish, Italian and Irish residents lived. Replete with riveting incidents (the gang

war between the Bowery Boys and the Dead Rabbits) and details (a devastating survey of spousal abuse and murder cites specific cases), this history comes vividly alive with enormous depth and heart. Whether describing children's work (boys sold papers or blackened boots; girls swept streets and sold corn, and were always in demand as prostitutes the going rate for virgins was \$10) or the significance of saints festivals for Italian immigrants, Anbinder proves himself a superb storyteller and historian. Illus. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

Exceptionally readable, this book debunks some of the more extreme legends about Five-Points, while not shrinking from describing the very real misery and squalor the neighborhood. I particularly enjoyed the character sketches of residents of this area. The book also explained why things happened and how. The influence of the saloon keepers, how many politicians got their start in the fire engine companies, the election day brawls and the draft (and other) riots are covered in detail. I am performing genealogy research on Irish ancestors in New York - this is an invaluable resource.

I'm not a historian, but I have read some books on the history of New York. This is one of the best if you're interested in the Five Points neighborhood. The book covers the time period from approximately 1830 to 1860 in wonderful detail. For all the detail, it is not a dry read. You can get a great sense of what life was like in these few square blocks in the time before the Civil War. If you are interested in the history of New York, particularly some of the city's less glamorous areas and eras, you want this book.

As a native NY'er and someone who is very interested in the history of NYC, I highly recommend this book to anyone who shares that interest. Anbinder presents the history of the Five Points in an interesting, sometimes humorous, sometimes sad, but always interesting way that makes this book hard to put down. Its well researched and far from a dry presentation of facts. A great book for anyone interested in this topic.

Great insight into the life and times of turn of the century NYC, specifically the Five Points and Bowery area. Jumped around a bit and often went extremely granular when it came to local elections and appointments which felt drawn out at times.

A detailed look at not only the Five Points area of New York and the extreme poverty of the inhabitants, but also a good look at 19th century immigration into the U.S. A bit tedious at times

when the author goes into detail about the local politicians, but overall a great read.

This really was such a great read. I'm a very big fan of history, especially New York history. After watching lots of PBS specials on New York and the Gangs of New York movie, this book was such a gift. All the locations and areas mentioned in this book I have been there, though they are a lot different (buildings, parks, streets, etc.) then they were one hundred and fifty years ago. I enjoyed reading and going back in time and having a little imagination.

If you have read "Low-Life" by Luc Sante, "Gangs of New York" by Herbert Asbury, or "New York by Gaslight" by George Foster, and enjoyed them even slightly, this book will not disappoint you. I thought the organization of the book into different aspects of life in the Five Points, instead of chronologically, was fine. It didn't confuse and seemed a logical way to organize a socially-focused history book. The author has a gift for writing some very detailed accounts and brings to life all the vibrancy and yes, squalor, held in the Five Points. This book is guaranteed to please if you are lover of NYC history.

Information intensive, long, but easy to read and follow the flow of history as it played out in the 5 Points. It synthesized how the various cultures, the politics and religions formed the NY of today.

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