



7-1-2003

Scorsese's Gangs of New York: Why Myth Matters

Timothy J. Gilfoyle

Loyola University Chicago, tgilfoy@luc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/history_facpubs

Recommended Citation

Gilfoyle, Timothy J.. Scorsese's Gangs of New York: Why Myth Matters. *Journal of Urban History*, 29, 5: 620-630, 2003. Retrieved from Loyola eCommons, History: Faculty Publications and Other Works, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0096144203029005006>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications and Other Works by Department at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in History: Faculty Publications and Other Works by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).
© Sage Publications

REVIEW ESSAY

SCORSESE'S GANGS OF NEW YORK:
WHY MYTH MATTERS

MARTIN SCORSESE, dir.; HARVEY WEINSTEIN, ALBERTO GRIMALDI, and MARTIN SCORSESE, prods., *Gangs of New York*. New York: Miramax Films, 2002, rated R, 2 hours, 44 minutes.

MARTIN SCORSESE, et al., *Gangs of New York: Making the Movie*. New York: Miramax Books, 2002, pp. 228, illustrations, \$24.95 paper.

HERBERT ASBURY, *The Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld*. New York: Knopf, 1928, pp. xvii, 400; reprint, New York: Old Town Books, 1989; reprint, New York: Paragon House, 1990; reprint, New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2001, pp. xvi, 366, all eds. with illustrations, appendix, bibliography, index, \$14.95 paper.

In December 2002, Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York* opened to critical acclaim. The *Chicago Tribune's* Michael Wilmington described the motion picture as "a period epic of hatred and fire," "a movie of grand reckless ambition," and "a film burning with creative passion, over-reaching, magnificently wild." *Gangs*, wrote A. O. Scott of the *New York Times*, is an "indelible epic of 19th-century urban criminality."¹ Whether we like it or not, *Gangs* will shape, color, and influence how many Americans comprehend the nineteenth-century American metropolises.

In certain respects, *Gangs* deserves praise. Few movies more accurately replicate nineteenth-century style and dress (reportedly seven thousand costumes). The accents and underworld argot borrowed from George Matsell's *The Rogue's Lexicon* (1859) create an authentic working-class language (Scorsese, pp. 101, 111).² The detailed reproduction of Five Points's Paradise Square—full of "groceries," streetwalking prostitutes, and evangelical reformers—looks like a panorama from *Harper's Weekly*, *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*, or *Valentine's Manual* come to life. Scorsese also captures the polyglot mix of Gotham's populace. The sometimes-violent competition among volun-

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Readers can access the *Virtual New York City Web site*, <http://www.vny.cuny.edu>, which contains a *Gangs of New York* errata page containing critical and scholarly reaction to the movie. The author wishes to thank Mary Rose Alexander, Elliott J. Gorn, and Eric Monkkenen for their comments and criticism of earlier versions of this essay.

JOURNAL OF URBAN HISTORY, Vol. 29 No. 5, July 2003 620-630
DOI: 10.1177/0096144203253977

© 2003 Sage Publications

teer fire companies, the boxing match along the docks, the battles between dog and rodent in a rat pit, and the violent reaction to Civil War conscription evoke elements of nineteenth-century New York.

Scorsese does not present a celebratory vision of nineteenth-century New York. Horatio Alger he is not; *Gangs* is no inspirational tale of rags-to-riches, upward mobility. In Scorsese's words, the film "sees the period as being a cauldron of conflict and violence out of which New York and this country were created" (Scorsese, p. 33). *Gangs* is a blood-soaked vision of American history.

But all too often, Scorsese's flamboyant caricature overwhelms any attachment to historical accuracy. A few examples stand out. The Old Brewery, where much of the action takes place, was torn down a decade prior to many of the incidents in the film. Five Points had no labyrinthian network of underground catacombs. U.S. naval warships never bombed Five Points during the draft riots (Scorsese, pp. 249-50).

Some of this can be excused as artistic prerogative. Scorsese acknowledges he needed to conflate certain events and invent specific individuals to construct a dramatic narrative. "We based some of our characters on real-life people and created others," he concedes. "We also took dramatic license by moving a few dates and places" (Scorsese, p. 20). Scorsese added the Chinese Pagoda and the opium den while acknowledging that these did not materialize until the 1870s when a larger Chinese population appeared in New York (Scorsese, p. 44). Barnum's Museum burns down during the draft riots, a year earlier than its actual incineration (Asbury, pp. 172-74).³

The protagonists illustrate this point. Bill "the Butcher" Cutting (played by Daniel Day-Lewis) is clearly a character based on the nativist gang leader "Butcher" Bill Poole, whose famous lines, "Now you've tasted my mutton. How do you like it?" and "I die a true American" are uttered by Cutting in the film (Scorsese, pp. 236, 251).⁴ Amsterdam Vallon (played by Leonardo DiCaprio) appears to be modeled after John Morrissey, an Irish immigrant and pugilist who challenged Poole on several occasions, one of which resulted in Morrissey's being battered by Poole and his gang. Morrissey's moxi so impressed Isaiah Rynders that he recruited Morrissey to provide "muscle" at the polls against Poole and his men. On one occasion, Morrissey outsmarted Poole, forcing the latter to retreat from a potential battle, much like a scene in *Gangs*. Morrissey then went on to a successful career as a congressman and professional gambler. According to assistant director Joe Reidy, "We wanted to be as historically accurate as possible, and yet not lose the artistry or the story" (Scorsese, p. 138).

Make no mistake about it, Scorsese sees himself as a historian, and a revisionist at that. "These are not the Americans we learned about in history class, but anonymous members of the working class and infamous figures of the underworld," Scorsese proclaims in one interview. "It was a mixture of peoples from different countries, of different religions, different races—and everybody trying to live together." To present a more authentic re-creation of the

draft riots, Scorsese even incorporates 1863 engravings of the events onscreen (Scorsese, pp. 45, 156).

How accurate is Scorsese's rendering of nineteenth-century New York? Despite the proclamations of a fealty to history, *Gangs* ignores the vast outpouring of historical writing on New York City during the past quarter century. Consider, for example, Tyler Anbinder's recent study of Five Points. By 1862, Anbinder shows, that neighborhood was considerably transformed from the community Charles Dickens visited in 1841. Commentators as diverse as the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor to local newspapers commented on the change. *Harper's Weekly* noted that both "its vice [and] its romance has vanished." The transformation of Five Points, wrote the *Times*, was "remarkable."⁵ By the 1870s, few gangs remained in Five Points.⁶

The key event in this transformation was the destruction of the very edifice *Gangs* highlights—the Old Brewery. The most notorious building in the neighborhood, if not all of New York by midcentury, the Brewery was torn down by evangelical reformers in 1852 and replaced with the Five Points Mission, which opened in June 1853.⁷ The destruction of the Old Brewery was part of a larger "urban renewal" campaign that began as early as 1850 when police captain John J. McManus brought indictments against more than forty brothel owners and their proprietors. The massive sweeps over a five-week period had a long-term impact: whereas approximately one-third of city's prostitution was situated in Five Points from 1830 to 1859, after 1860 less than 15 percent was.⁸

Anbinder further shows that the Dead Rabbits gang most likely never existed. The well-known riot involving the Bowery Boys in 1857 was a feud between long-standing political factions in Five Points, not a tribal battle between Irish Catholics and native-born Protestants as Scorsese wants us to believe.⁹ One looks in vain throughout *Gangs* to find any evidence that the screenwriters read Elliott Gorn's examinations of pugilism, honor, and Bill Poole; Paul Gilje's nineteenth-century rioters; Eric Monkkonen's murderers; Christine Stansell's "city of women"; and the descriptions of African American life found in the writings of Graham Hodges, Leslie Harris, and Shane White, to mention only a few.¹⁰ Instead, Scorsese cites numerous films he relied upon for "general inspiration" and "historic incidents" (Scorsese, p. 21). What about a history book?

Scorsese's cavalier disregard for history is best evidenced by the treatment of the draft riots of 1863. To some degree, historians have to admire Scorsese for placing this event—the most violent and deadly urban insurrection in nineteenth-century America—at the center of his story. Scorsese presents no sentimental view of American history. But unfortunately, the director ignores the most careful historical research on the riots and ultimately substitutes myth, hyperbole, and sentimentality for—dare I say it—reality. The number of draft riot victims has long been exaggerated. In 1865, George Templeton Strong wrote in his diary that police superintendent John Kennedy told him

that 1,155 individuals were killed. Governor Horatio Seymour repeated a police estimate that 1,000 people died. A War Department detective gave the death toll as 1,462.¹¹ *Gangs* accepts these and other inflated declarations with little question.

The most comprehensive and careful research, done by historian Adrian Cook, refutes such claims. The police sought to prove their bravery. Democrats to demonstrate the unpopularity of Lincoln's policies, Republicans to have martial law declared in New York City. Most of the roaming bands of rioters that attacked homes, brothels, and shops were quite small, usually between 20 to 50 people. Even when rioters engaged in a pitched battle with police, they never numbered more than 300. The whole number of participants was 3,000 at most, and some observers insisted that the total never exceeded 300. When the riots ended, 73 soldiers and 105 policemen were wounded, which are fairly reliable figures. Most revealingly, Cook found only 119 riot-related deaths, 11 of whom were African American. Among law enforcement forces, 2 policemen and 8 soldiers perished. The most recent examinations of New York during these years by historians Iver Bernstein, Leslie Harris, Edward K. Spann, Michael Wallace, and Edwin Burrows concur with Cook's findings.¹²

Scorsese and his screenwriters read little, if any, of this history. The movie script describes mobs as large as forty-five hundred moving through Manhattan (Scorsese, 247). The film's historical consultant Luc Sante offers undocumented, if not downright fictional, assertions that fifty to seventy thousand rioted, of whom two thousand died, including one hundred African Americans and fifty guardsmen (Scorsese, p. 14; Asbury, pp. 169-70).¹³ This is not to diminish the scale and unprecedented level of violence associated with the draft riots. The event remains one of the two or three worst civil disorders in U.S. history.¹⁴ But *Gangs of New York's* depiction of the event transforms it into a bloodbath on the scale of Antietam or Gettysburg. As violent as were the draft riots, they presented something different than a Civil War battle.¹⁵

The substitution of myth for history in Scorsese's *Gangs* originates from an overreliance on Herbert Asbury's *The Gangs of New York*. A vivid and engaging work, Asbury's book remains in print seventy-five years after its first publication and is frequently cited.¹⁶ Readers are introduced to a colorful cast of characters. Gallus Mag bites the ears off obstreperous patrons in her saloon and preserves them in a pickled state in a jar over her bar. George "Snatchem" Leese sucks the blood from the wounds of fighting boxers to get them back in the ring. Jack the Rat earns his nickname for biting the heads off mice and rats (Asbury, pp. 50-1). Along with Jacob Riis, Asbury remains one of the most influential writers on Gotham's nineteenth-century gangs.¹⁷

But Asbury's *Gangs* is more a work of sensational journalism—indeed pulp fiction—than accurate history. The book overwhelms readers with a sordid catalogue of gangs, their violent exploits and barbaric rituals. Throughout *Gangs*, Asbury adopts the voice of a moralistic, evangelical reformer. The "dives" of New York, for example, are emblematic of Gilded Age Gotham as

"the modern Gomorrah," a "demoralized" city in which "the criminal classes revelled [*sic*] in an orgy of vice and crime" (Asbury, p. 174).

Reality was much more complicated. The most prominent "dives" like Geoghagan's, McGlory's, and the Haymarket were not simply centers of crime.¹⁸ They indeed tolerated certain illicit behaviors—the unlicensed sale of alcohol, commercial sex, and gambling, for example. But such establishments were best known for their nightlife, sponsoring music, dance, and variety acts. For an earnest Victorian culture suspicious of play, here were open displays of revelry. In their time, they were among the most celebrated nighttime venues in the metropolis. Dives not only connected elements of working-class and plebeian culture with the underworld but, as Daniel Czitrom has written, confused the line between entertainments that were licensed and those that were illicit. Places like the Haymarket "were the centers of 'high life'" remembered police officer Cornelius Willemse, "and people flocked to see them from all parts of the world."¹⁹ They were the first nightclubs.

Significantly, errors abound throughout the text. The Old Brewery, writes Asbury, had more than 1,000 residents (Asbury, p. 14). Yet the 1850 census found only 221 residents.²⁰ Murder is rampant in Asbury's New York. During one fifteen-year period before its destruction in 1852, he declares that the Old Brewery averaged a murder a night, and the tenements in nearby Cow Bay averaged annually in New York, one wonders where all the bodies went.²¹

Elsewhere, Asbury asserts that by 1855, thirty thousand gangs populated New York, some with more than one thousand members (Asbury, pp. xv, 105, 252). If true, that would have allowed for one gang for every five school-age children in New York.²² Writing in the age of Al Capone, he proclaimed with typical hyperbole that New York's nineteenth-century gangs were "the most ferocious criminals who ever stalked the streets of an American city" (Asbury, pp. 63, 225). Asbury even adopts the biologically driven language of the era and still popular in the twentieth century. Interracial marriages are "frightful." The Chinese are "a race of gamblers." Billy McGlory's Armory Hall is "probably the most vicious resort New York has ever seen," in part because of the interracial clientele and the toleration of male homosexual behaviors. The typical gang member merely "fulfilled his natural destiny" (Asbury, pp. xvi-xviii, 15, 187, 304).²³

Equally significant are the subtle ways Asbury describes gang life in Gotham. Throughout the volume, he invokes descriptive language more appropriate to medieval Europe than modern New York. Gang leaders are "chiftans" and "lords." Violent conflicts are "wars" and "feuds." Successful gangs enjoy "sovereignty," are "reigning monarchs," and form "vassal combinations." Men are admired for their "strength and valor." Losers are "reduced to vassals" (Asbury, pp. 43, 90-1, 256, 267, 269, 349, 360, 369).

This medieval vision of New York City seems to have been swallowed whole by Scorsese. The script of *Gangs* compares Paradise Square with "Eng-

land in the Middle Ages," filled with gangs "armed like Visigoths with hand-forged clubs and pitchforks" (Scorsese, p. 162). "War councils" among various gangs meet prior to their bloodletting to determine the rules of battle. "By the ancient laws of combat," screams Bill the Butcher, "we offer our bodies to the ghosts of the warriors that have gone before us" (Scorsese, pp. 239-41, 249). The film presents a style of violence truly medieval in form and style—at least by Hollywood standards.

Gangs's filmmakers admit as much. Vic Armstrong, the film's action-unit director, concedes that the violence in *Gangs* was structured and choreographed to "make the action extravagant." Most victims of violence in urban confrontations, acknowledges Armstrong, would simply have been bludgeoned (Scorsese, pp. 138, 144, 146-7).

Critics have noted the tribal quality of the film. A. O. Scott wrote that even "though this is Lower Manhattan in 1846, it might as well be the Middle Ages of the time of Gilgamesh." This "near great" movie is like "a Breughel painting come to life."²⁴ None of this is surprising given Scorsese's earlier works. *Mean Streets*, *Goodfellas*, *The Age of Innocence*, *Casino*, and *Raging Bull* reflect Scorsese's fascination with honor, retribution, loyalty, and vengeance, all of which are linked together through tribal tradition, folklore, and language.

Yet Scorsese's vision of tribal violence in midcentury Gotham is hard to fathom. Why does the Irish immigrant McGloin (played by Gary Lewis) fight alongside Priest Vallon (played by Liam Neeson) and his fellow nationals in 1844 and then with Butcher Bill in the 1860s (Scorsese, p. 221)? Does anyone really believe that Butcher Bill would gouge out his own eye because he failed to look his arch rival "in the eye" during battle? Even the plot of *Gangs* follows an preposterous path. When Cutting finally kills his hated Irish enemy Priest Vallon, he elevates his "papist" image to a position of honor in his backroom parlor. Vallon's son Amsterdam returns sixteen years later with vengeance in his heart, eventually kills Butcher Bill, and then buries him beside his own father!

This is honor run amuck, Hollywood's version of the Mafia as a sacred brotherhood, blended with sentimental conventions of old soldiers reconciled at last, and all of it transposed on nineteenth-century Gotham. When "Butcher Bill" Poole was murdered in 1855, it was by a gun in a saloon, not a knife in an urban battleground of honor.²⁵ By then, modern-day firearms had supplanted medieval weaponry. Scorsese even misses opportunities to accurately portray the horror of the era's violence and brutality. Consider the scene when the wounded Amsterdam Vallon lies prostrate in the Chinese Pagoda after his failed assassination attempt of Cutting. Bill the Butcher refuses to kill him. "He ain't earned a death at my hands," bellows Cutting. "He shall walk among you cloaked in his dishonor, forever marked with shame" (Scorsese, p. 219). He pulls out a red-hot poker and proceeds to brand Amsterdam's face. If this were "Butcher" Bill Poole, he would have gouged out Amsterdam's eye.

But Scorsese is determined to turn death into a medieval cartoon.²⁶ The ascending political boss William M. Tweed (played by Jim Broadbent) asks Cutting "to hang somebody" to deflect the growing public association of crime with Tammany Hall. Cutting arranges for the execution of four vagrants for the crimes of "lewdness, jack-rolling, sneak-thievery, chloral-hydrating, sodomy, strangulation, and enthusiastic corruption of the public good." A crowd of a hundred, with hot-com girls and other vendors hawking their wares, gathers in a carnival spirit to witness the event. Cutting even negotiates with one of the condemned on his way to the gallows, who sells his golden locket for a dollar and a half (Scorsese, pp. 196-7).²⁷ Scorsese's absurd fantasy trivializes history, ignoring how "private" executions replaced such public spectacles after 1825. As historians like Louis Masur have shown, nineteenth-century Americans increasingly viewed public executions as little more than festivals of disorder. After 1850, New York's executions took place in the "privacy" of the Tombs courtyard, deliberately hidden from any sort of public viewing, not in the middle of Paradise Square.²⁸

Violence was more prosaic for the average Five Points resident. The most common source of death originated not from knives but from microbes; the most vexing problem was disease and poor sanitation. From 1850 to 1870, the neighborhood was the sickest in Gotham. In the four years from 1860 to 1863, the mortality rate in the Sixth Ward ranged from 36 to 43 per 1,000 residents (the national rate was 23). In 1864 alone, more than 150 residents of Mulberry and Baxter streets died of typhus, typhoid, and other contagious diseases. No other streets in the city witnessed as much death.²⁹

The violence in *Gangs* has more in common with *Pulp Fiction* than nineteenth-century New York, or more precisely, as Daniel Czitrom has described it, *Braveheart* meets *Mean Streets*.³⁰ This is more about Hollywood than history, and the movie's writers admit as much. Screenwriter Jay Cocks acknowledges he was attracted to the film by "the potential mythology of the period." "I always thought about this movie the way Marty once described it to me—'a Western on Mars.'" When asked to summarize *Gangs*, action director Vic Armstrong described it as "Charles Dickens in New York with a *Mad Max* type of action and slant on life" (Scorsese, pp. 24, 147).

Some have compared *Gangs* to *Birth of a Nation*. D. W. Griffith's epic vision of Reconstruction in the post-Civil War South,³¹ Griffith's film, adapted from Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman*, portrays the Ku Klux Klan as savior of Southern culture, Reconstruction as a corrupt program by Northern elites to exploit white Southerners. Black leaders were depicted at best as illiterate simpletons, at worst as bloody rapists. In the end, North and South overcome their differences and unite "in common defense of their Aryan birthright," as one advertisement read.

Birth of a Nation, like *Gangs of New York*, was structured around a conception of the past grounded in myth. A decade prior to the release of *Birth*, historians John W. Burgess and William A. Dunning argued that blacks were "chil-

dren" incapable of self-government, that African American suffrage was "a monstrous thing," and that "a black skin means membership in a race of men which has never of itself succeeded in subjecting passion to reason, has never, therefore, created any civilization."³²

But myths have consequences. The fiction masquerading as history perpetuated by Dixon and Griffith remained a common part of American history textbooks for more than half a century. President Woodrow Wilson, upon viewing *Birth of a Nation*, described it as "history written in lightning." Almost a century later, we are confronted with another mythic, cinematic epic disguised as nineteenth-century history. Let's hope lightning doesn't strike twice.

—Timothy J. Gilfoyle
Loyola University Chicago

NOTES

1. Michael Wilmington, "Scorsese's *Gangs* Explodes in a Near-Masterpiece," *Chicago Tribune*, December 20, 2002; A. O. Scott, "To Feel a City Seethe as Modernity Is Born," *New York Times*, December 20, 2002.

2. *Gangs of New York: Making the Movie* includes the shooting script, an introduction by Luc Sante; an afterword by producer Harvey Weinstein; and interviews with director Martin Scorsese, screenwriters Jay Cocks, Steve Zaillian, Kenneth Lonergan, Hossein Amini, researcher Marianne Bower, production designer Dante Ferretti, set decorator Francesca Lo Schiavo, casting director Ellen Lewis, action unit director Vic Armstrong, actors Leonardo DiCaprio, Daniel Day-Lewis, Cameron Diaz, Liam Neeson, Jim Broadbent, Henry Thomas, John C. Reilly, Brendan Gleeson, Gary Lewis, and others.

3. In this essay, I employ the pagination from the original and ensuing editions, not the recent version by Thunder's Mouth Press.

4. Also see Elliott J. Gorn, "Good-Bye Boys, I Die a True American: Homicide, Nativism, and Working-Class Culture in Antebellum New York City," *Journal of American History* 74 (1987): 388-410.

5. Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points* (New York, 2001), 266.

6. Few gangs existed in the downtown business district by 1880. The neighborhoods south of Houston Street, once an area of saloons, brothels, and various forms of nightlife, wrote one writer on gangs, were "as quiet and humdrum as any business thoroughfare." Neighborhoods in the center of Manhattan, claimed one, were "unfavorably situated" for gangs because they had "no water front." See *Sun* clippings, September 15, 1884 (Five Points); September 8, 1884 (unfavorably situated; few gangs in Tenderloin), vol. 9; *Herald* clipping, July 29, 1887 (no gangs), vol. 38, all in District Attorney Scrapbooks, New York City Municipal Archives and Records Center (hereafter, DAS).

7. Ladies of the Mission, *The Old Brewery, and the New Mission House at the Five Points* (New York, 1854), 37, 62, 64-8, 80, gives precise dates for the destruction of the Old Brewery (December 1852), the laying of the Mission cornerstone (January 27, 1853), and the opening dedication of the Mission (June 18, 1853). Frederick S. Lightfoot, ed., *Nineteenth-Century New York in Rare Photographic Views* (New York, 1981), plate 88, has a photograph of the Five Points Mission, 63-65 Park Street, from 1875, and claims the Mission was constructed in 1852. Images of the Old Brewery include the pen and ink wash drawing by R. E. Mead, *Old Brewery, Five Points Mission, New York* (1870), oil on canvas, no. 54,90,183, Metropolitan Museum of Art (on view in Luce Center). Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Religion and the Rise of the American City: The New York Mission Society, 1812-1870* (Ithaca, NY, 1971), 225-44; and Graham Hodges, "Desirable Companions and Lovers": Irish and African Americans in the Sixth Ward, 1830-1870," in Ronald Bayor and Timothy Meagher, eds., *The New York Irish* (Baltimore, 1996), 112, 114, date the destruction of the Old Brewery and construction of the Mission in 1851. In 1854, the Rev. Louis Pease established the Five

Points House of Industry, and a year later a new structure was erected on the north side of Paradise Square at 155 Worth Street. On the House of Industry, see New York City, *Manual of the Corporation of the City of New York* (New York, 1869), 377-8; B. K. Pierce, *A Half-Century with Juvenile Delinquents; or, the New York House of Refuge and Its Times* (New York, 1869), 212-4; Anbinder, *Five Points*, 88, 92, 103, 197, 207, 10, 216, 231-2, 235-40, 250-67. Scorsese seems to believe that the Old Brewery simply became a mission, the same building used for a different purpose. See Scorsese, *Gangs of New York: Making the Movie*, 40.

8. Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York, 1992), 183, 335, 384. This is not to say prostitution vanished. In 1866, one adjoining block (where the House of Industry was located) reportedly housed fifty prostitutes, all of whom were Irish. See Citizens' Association of New York, *Report of the Council of Hygiene and Public Health of the Citizens' Association of New York upon the Sanitary Condition of the City*, vol. 2 (New York, 1866), 77-8; *Times*, March 11, 1860; *Brother Jonathan*, March 24, 1866.

9. Anbinder, *Five Points*, 284-9.

10. Elliott J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca, NY, 1986); Gorn, "Good-Bye Boys, I Die a True American," 388-410; Gorn, "Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch": The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry," *American Historical Review* 90 (1985): 18-43; Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York, 1986); Stansell, "The Origins of Sweatshops: Women and Early Industrialization in New York City," in Michael Frisch and Daniel J. Walkowitz, eds., *Working-Class America: Essays on Labor, Community, and American Society* (Urbana, IL, 1983), 78-103; Paul A. Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York City, 1763-1834* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1987); Eric H. Monkton, *Murder in New York City* (Berkeley, CA, 2001); Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810* (Athens, GA, 1990); White, "It Was a Proud Day": African Americans, Festivals, and Parades in the North, 1741-1834," *Journal of American History* 81 (1994): 13-50; Hodges, "Desirable Companions and Lovers"; Leslie Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago, 2003).

11. Diary of George Templeton Strong, August 1, 1865, cited in Adrian Cook, *The Armies of the Street: The New York City Draft Riots of 1863* (Lexington, KY, 1974), 193-4.

12. Cook, *Armies*, 193-8, 310 note 3; Iver Bernstein, *The New York City Draft Riots: Their Significance for American Society and Politics in the Age of the Civil War* (New York, 1989), 5; Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York, 1998), 895; Edward K. Spann, *Gotham at War: New York City, 1860-1865* (Wilmington, DE, 2002), 101; Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, 285-6.

13. Also see Luc Sante, "Mean Streets," *New York Review of Books*, December 20, 2001, p. 85.

14. Recent research on the Tulsa race riot of 1921 concludes that nearly three hundred people were killed in that event. See Alfred L. Brophy, *Reconstructing the Dreamland* (New York, 2001); James S. Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance: The Tulsa Race War and Its Legacy* (New York, 2000); Scott Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1982).

15. Cook, *Armies*, 194, 310 note 3.

16. For examples of works that rely on Asbury to describe nineteenth-century gangs in New York, see Alvin Harlow, *Old Bowery Days: The Chronicles of a Famous Street* (New York, 1931); Frederic M. Thrasher, *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago* (Chicago, 1930), 38, 559; Luc Sante, *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York* (New York, 1991); Lewis Yablonsky, *Gangsters: Fifty Years of Madness, Drugs, and Death on the Streets of America* (New York, 1997), 29-30; Joshua Brown, "Gangs," in Kenneth T. Jackson, ed., *The Encyclopedia of New York City* (New Haven, CT, 1995), 449-50.

17. Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (New York, 1890); Riis, *The Children of the Poor* (New York, 1892); Riis, *The Battle with the Slum* (New York, 1902). Related influential works by Asbury include *The Barbary Coast: An Informal History of the New Orleans Underworld* (New York, 1933); *The French Quarter: An Informal History of the New Orleans Underworld* (New York, 1936); *Gem of the Prairie: An Informal History of the Chicago Underworld* (New York, 1940).

18. "Dives" were difficult to and inconsistently defined. On the common usage of the word and the difficulty of defining the term, see James T. Brown to Abram Hewitt, March 30, 1887, Folder 246, Box 1366, Hewitt Papers, Mayors' Papers, New York City Municipal Archives and Records Center (hereafter, MP); New York State Senate, Investigation of the Police Department of New York City (Albany, NY, 1895); Henry Collins Brown, *Valentine's Manual of Old New York, 1927* (New York, 1926), 192; *NPG*, December 8, 1866 (free and eases), September 18, 1879, unmarked clipping, January 25, 1885, vol. 10; *Sun* clipping, September 5, 1886 (4,000 of 14,000), vol. 25, both in DAS; Asbury, *Gangs*, 174.

19. Cornelius W. Willems, *Behind the Green Lights* (New York, 1931), 69; Daniel Czitrom, "The Politics of Performance: From Theater Licensing to Movie Censorship in Turn-of-the-Century New York," *American Quarterly* 44 (1992): 525-32. One police report claimed 223 concert saloons existed by 1866. See New York Metropolitan Police, *Annual Report* (New York, 1866), 19-20. By 1876, police reports identified only 57 licensed "theaters, halls, and concert rooms," indicating that many concert halls remained uncensured. See "List of Theaters, Halls, Concert Rooms, etc." undated (1875-1876), Folder 262, Box 1264, Wickham Papers, MP. For the concert saloon's influence on the development of vaudeville and popular culture, see Robert W. Snyder, *Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (New York, 1989), 3-25; Gunther Barth, *City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1980), 194-214.

20. Dwellings 23 and 24, Sixth Ward, United States Manuscript Census, 1850, National Archives, cited in Anbinder, *Five Points*, 69-70 (221 residents), 452.

21. Since the Old Brewery was converted to housing in 1837 and torn down in 1852, the fifteen-year period mentioned by Asbury had to include its entire history as a residential structure. For more on this point, see Anbinder, *Five Points*, 68-71. Elsewhere, Asbury claims that murders "were frequent" in concert saloons like Ownsey Geoghegan's on the Bowery. See Asbury, *Gangs*, 191-2. No evidence exists to confirm this assertion.

22. In 1860, New York had 153,000 registered school-aged children in public and private schools (of which only 58,000 daily attended). See Diane Ravitch, *The Great School Wars: New York City, 1805-1973* (New York, 1974), 405.

23. A typical Asbury error is his description of Whygo gang leader Daniel Lyons's execution. Asbury confuses two individuals with the same name and merges their identities. One Daniel Lyons (1857-1887) was a pickpocket, a member of the Whygo gang, and an associate of Daniel Driscoll. He was killed by Daniel Murphy in the latter's saloon at 199 Worth Street on August 13, 1887. See unmarked clippings, August 14, 15, 17, 1887, vol. 39, DAS. Another and different Daniel Lyons (1861-1888) was raised in the "Gasthouse District" on the East Side north of 14th Street where he was living when he shot and killed the athlete Joseph Quinn on July 5, 1887. See unmarked clippings, July 6, 7, 8, 11, 1887, vol. 37; July 22, 23, 30, 31, 1887; August 4, 1887, vol. 38, DAS. White imprisoned in the Tombs, this Daniel Lyons befriended the Whygo gang leader Daniel Driscoll before his execution on August 21, 1888. Numerous reporters and later historians confused the Daniel Lyons who killed Quinn with the Daniel Lyons of the Whygo gang. The earliest source of this confusion can be traced back to erroneous reports that the Daniel Lyons with whom Driscoll planned an escape was "a fellow Whygo." See unmarked clippings, August 14, 1887; September 20, 1887, all in vol. 40; unmarked clipping, January 24, 1888, vol. 44, DAS; John Josiah Munro, *The New York Tombs, Inside and Out!* (Brooklyn, 1909), 272, 276; Asbury, *Gangs*, 228-9; Sante, *Low Life*, 215.

24. Scorsese, *Gangs of New York: Making the Movie*, 19, 88, 92; Scott, "To Feel a City Seethe."

25. Gorn, "Good-Bye Boys, I Die a True American."

26. Medieval Europe had much higher murder rates than nineteenth-century New York. Fourteenth-century Europe, for example, had an approximate homicide rate of fifty murders per one hundred thousand residents; mid-nineteenth-century New York's rate was usually less than ten. See Monkton, *Murder in New York*, 154-6.

27. "Chloral-hydrating" is a reference to using "knock-out drops" or some form of anesthesia in the pursuit of a robbery.

28. Louis P. Masur, *Rites of Execution: Capital Punishment and the Transformation of American Culture, 1776-1865* (New York, 1989); Monkton, *Murder in New York*, 162 (executions rare). From 1851 to 1869, fourteen individuals were executed in New York City, all of them in the Tombs, and never more than three in a single year. Only forty executions took place in New York City in the second half of the nineteenth century. The last Tombs execution occurred in 1889. See Thomas Byrnes, *Professional Criminals of America* (New York, 1886, revised 1895), 369-74. By comparison, seventy-five thousand were executed in England from 1530 to 1630. See V. A. C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People* (Oxford, 1994), 8-10, 616-9.

29. Citizens' Association, *Report*, vol. 2, pp. 74-5, 77, 84. The first appearance of cholera in the epidemic of 1849 was at 21 and 23 Baxter Street. On death rates, see John Duffy, *A History of Public Health in New York City, 1625-1866* (New York, 1966), 535-8. The one scene in *Gangs* dealing with disease treats the subject with casual disregard. Horace Greeley, Schermerhorn, and the police officer Happy Jack walk through Paradise Square and casually step over a dead cholera victim. See "Shooting Script," 193. In reality, any such pedestrian stroll would quickly turn into a horrified dash to escape the contagion.

30. Personal e-mail correspondence, Daniel Czitrom to Timothy Gilfoyle, December 23, 2002, in author's possession.




31. Scott, "To Feel a City Seethe"; Wilmington, "Scorsese's Gangs."

32. John W. Burgess, *Reconstruction and the Constitution, 1866-1876* (New York, 1902), 44-5, 133, 24-46; William A. Dunning, *Essays on the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York, 1904), quoted in Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York, 1988), 609. One important difference between the two films is that *Birth* was based on what was considered "respectable" history at the time.

Timothy J. Gilfoyle is the author of *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York: Norton, 1992) and a coeditor of the "Historical Studies in Urban America" series of the University of Chicago Press. He is currently completing two books, one on the nineteenth-century underworld and another of the creation of Millennium Park in Chicago. He teaches at Loyola University Chicago.






Your New Best Friend...

The FREE Consumer Action Website

Move Over Rover...

The FREE Consumer Action Website is the consumer's new best friend. It's got thousands of links to companies and government agencies -- the names, numbers, advice, and connections you need to get your wrongs righted.

With this faithful puppy, you can sniff out the right answers and track down the best help to fix your consumer problems in a flash at www.pueblo.gsa.gov.

When it's time to take action, come to Pueblo, the place you've trusted for years. You'll get repairs repaired, credit card fraud fixed, telemarketers silenced . . . and much, much more.

So, use the power of the Internet and the Federal government. Log on to www.pueblo.gsa.gov, and click on the FREE Consumer Action Website.



We'll teach whatever you need, and promise never to chew up your slippers!

www.pueblo.gsa.gov