

BEYOND ANTEBELLUM SECTIONALISM: NEW YORK CITY'S LOCAL SCENE
DURING THE 1850s AS REFLECTED IN THE *NEW YORK TIMES*

By

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Abstract

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Historian David M. Potter has asserted that "it should be remembered that most human beings during [the 1850s] went about their daily lives, preoccupied with their personal affairs, with no sense of impending disaster nor any fixation on the issue of slavery." This study tests Potter's statement by examining the concerns of 1850s *New York Times* readers.

New York, the most populous and economically prosperous city in the nation, offers an abundance of printed sources, including newspapers and personal writings, for such an examination. Primarily using the *New York Times* and the diary of George Templeton Strong, the non-sectional matters and concerns to New Yorkers of the decade of the 1850s have been divided into three themes. The first, "A Modern City in a Modern World," concerns New York's drive to establish itself as a progressive and enlightened city on par with the major cities of Western Europe. This drive is demonstrated through the creation of the transatlantic telegraph cable and the development of consumerism and leisure activities. The second theme, "The Political

Machine: The City's Conflicts," concerns New York's affliction with political corruption at both the state and local level. Of particular focus here are the career of Mayor Fernando Wood and the tensions between the city's nativists and immigrant groups.

The final theme, "Societal Interests and Intrigues," concerns the often-sensational stories and events that captivated the *Times'* reading public. These events include the phenomenon of Spiritualism, debates concerning the temperance movement, and the public's fascination with murder of Dr. Harvey Burdell. Together, these three themes demonstrate the legitimacy of Potter's contention; during the 1850s New York City residents were concerned about numerous matters--they were hardly focused exclusively upon those of slavery and sectionalism.

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I. INTRODUCTION

HISTORIANS' HIGHTSIGHT

"Do not trust your memory," warns Georges Duhamel in *The Heart's Domain*, "it is a net full of holes; the most beautiful prizes slip through it."¹ The memory of the modern historian is no exception. Students of the nineteenth-century United States tend to focus their studies on the American Civil War, and not totally without cause. That conflict, with its four years of battle and over six hundred thousand deaths, was the formative event of the nineteenth-century.² However in correctly ascertaining the significance of that event, historians have inadvertently reduced the significance of other developments. Such is particularly true in studies of the 1850s. The decade preceding the Civil War was much more than a build-up to that great event. It included many occasions, topics, and concerns much more pertinent to the everyday lives of average citizens than the sectional crisis or the debate on slavery.

David M. Potter, in his *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861*, the seminal work on the on the state of the Union leading up to the Civil War, has cautioned that:

Hindsight, the historian's chief asset and his main liability, has enabled all historical writers to know that the decade of the [eighteen] fifties terminated in a great civil war. Knowing it, they have consistently treated the decade not as a segment of time with a character of its own,

¹ Georges Duhamel, *The Heart's Domain*, trans. Eleanor Kenyon Stimson Brooks (New York: The Century Co., 1919).

² David Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1976), 583.

but as a prelude to something else. By the very term “antebellum” they have diagnosed a whole period in the light of what came after. . . . Seen in this way, the fifties become a kind of vortex, whirling the country in ever narrower circles and more rapid revolutions into the pit of war. Because of the need for theme and focus in any history, this is probably inevitable. But for the sake of realism, it should be remembered that most human beings during these years went about their daily lives, preoccupied with their personal affairs, with no sense of impending disaster nor any fixation on the issue of slavery. It is also realistic to recognize that for many people there were other public issues seeming more important than slavery.”³

This study, in its focus on New York City and the *New York Times*, will attempt to discover some of the most prevalent of these “other public issues” and explore what they reveal about the character of the decade of the 1850s from the perspective of the paper and its readers.

Ideally, for a study to discern popular concerns and feeling in the urban United States in the 1850s, one would need to do a study on a Northern city such as New York, a Southern city such as Richmond, a deep South city such as Charleston, an interior city such as Chicago, a Western city such as San Francisco, and possibly others. However, the limitations of a master’s thesis do not allow for a scope of that magnitude, and one locale had to be singled out for this study. New York City was the obvious choice. New York State, with a population of over three million by 1850, was the most populous in the United States of America. The city of New York itself had a population of 515,547, making it the most populous city in the nation. Of the state’s population, 3,048,325 were whites and 49,069 were blacks. New York in 1850 claimed a zero slave

³ Ibid., 145.

population, although slavery had been only recently eradicated from the state in 1827.⁴ With its 655,929 foreign-born citizens, New York had an immigrant population double that of the next-highest state. Of that number, 419,094 were counted in New York County. Only 98,722 of the state's free population aged twenty and older were illiterate, meaning that nearly ninety-seven percent of its citizens had the ability to read and write.⁵ Economically, New York was the wealthiest state in the nation. Total real and personal estate values reached \$1,080,309,216, and with 23,553 manufacturing establishments, New York was also the manufacturing capital of America. Farm land, some 19,119,084 acres, was the most acreage in all the sixteen northern states, but less than the southern states of Georgia, North Carolina and Virginia.⁶

The communications boom of the mid-1800s provides for great printed sources for studying the decade of the 1850s. New inventions and technologies had permitted a great increase in the number and size of newspapers around the country. The rotary press, patented by New York State resident Richard Hoe in 1846, was capable of producing over twenty thousand pages per hour, allowing a paper to be printed more quickly and thus with more current news. Soon papermaking machines were invented that created newsprint from cheap, abundant wood pulp instead of more costly cotton

⁴ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2006), 31.

⁵ United States Census Bureau, *A Compendium of the Ninth Census, June 1, 1870* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872), 8, 271, 10, 377, 459.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 639, 799, 688.

and linen rags, the scarcity of which had inhibited the expansion of earlier newspapers.⁷ In the end, the costs of the producing a paper were cut to one-sixth, leading to the transition from the traditional sixpenny papers to the new penny press. “By one estimate, the news made up roughly 95 percent of the total weight of mail by the 1830s.”⁸ These advancements allowed more pages, more papers, and, thus, more stories. The press of early America into the nineteenth-century was principally political.⁹ “The dominant concept of the press’s role in early America was political and clearest during the first three decades of the nineteenth century. The press served other purposes, but its content, function, and role reflected Americans’ primary interest in fashioning a new form of government and debating ideas for the country’s development.”¹⁰ As the country developed and progressed further and further from its revolutionary days, less focus was required on the creation of government. The country had moved on to its great reform era (1830-1860), of which the penny press was an integral part. “It could be argued, in fact,” writes Hazel Dicken-Garcia, “that the penny

⁷ Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 678.

⁸ Thomas C. Leonard, *News for All: America’s Coming-of-Age with the Press* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 13.

⁹ For more information on the political reporting of the early American press, see Jeffrey L. Pasley’s *“The Tyranny of Printers”: Newspapers Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 1-47.

¹⁰ Hazel Dicken-Garcia, *Journalistic Standards in Nineteenth-Century America* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 30.

press was itself a reform movement, while at the same time it was a product of broader drives sweeping the country, for every aspect of journalism was affected.”¹¹

Reforms of the era focused on individual rights. These ranged from the rights of women and free blacks, abolition, and child labor, to ending monopolies on land ownership, instituting the ten-hour workday, and universal education.¹² “By-mid century, journalism reflected reform preoccupations and the increased concern with the individual, resulting in changes in the nature of news, news styles, newspaper work, conception of audience, means of financial support, and press structure and role. In effect, journalism was redefined.”¹³ One of the most significant of these redefinitions, and the most pertinent to this study, was the press’s shift from political debates to event reporting. “News became event oriented, which is not to say that previous journalism did not report events; rather, dominant newspaper content began to focus on events, as opposed to political views. Furthermore, news categories increased, from foreign, political, party and national government reporting, to include crime, sports, and local ‘beats’ such as the courts and police. And news of violence and a flurry of sensational journalism also appeared. Substance changed from esoteric polemical essays typical of

¹¹ Ibid., 40.

¹² For an overview of these reforms and the reform era, see Ronald G. Walters’s *American Reformers: 1815-1860*, ed. Eric Foner (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

¹³ Dicken-Garcia, 41.

the party press era.”¹⁴ The new focus on events gives great insights into the everyday happenings and concerns of the 1850s that the pre-penny press era cannot provide.

Yet the reduction in political reporting did not mean that papers were not politically affiliated. The opposite is in fact true, and that fact had a significant impact on the source for this study. The paper chosen for this paper is the *New York Daily-Times*--henceforth referred to by its current title, the *New York Times*--and was so singled out for its relatively independent status. When a group of Whig bankers surveyed the landscape of the penny press at the dawn of the 1850s, they were disenchanted with what they found. “[James Gordon] Bennett’s *Herald* seemed too flamboyant, the *Sun* too plebian, and Horace Greeley, though a stalwart Whig, had dedicated the *Tribune* to promoting social justice ‘causes.’ The dailies’ collective prosperity, however, suggested there might be room for another penny press--more agreeably conservative in style and politics.”¹⁵ The bankers thus raised \$110,000 in start-up capital and chose Henry Jarvis Raymond, a former assistant to Greeley, as their editor. Raymond had previously established his conservative reputation while managing editor of New York’s *Courier and Enquirer*, where he engaged his former boss in a six-month print duel on the questionable merits of socialism. The *Times*, although founded by Whigs, and generally supporting the Whig and Republican Parties, was commonly considered more

¹⁴ Ibid., 41.

¹⁵ Burrows, 679.

independent than its older competitor, the *Tribune*.¹⁶ The *Tribune*, while of greater circulation than the *Times*, was a staunchly partisan Whig paper (later Republican) on which Greeley collaborated with William Seward and Thurlow Weed.¹⁷

In addition to the *Times*, a major source for this paper is the diary of George Templeton Strong, declared by historian Daniel Aaron to be “the richest and most informative day-to-day account of American life in the nineteenth century.”¹⁸ Strong, a successful lawyer born in New York City in January 1820, kept a meticulous diary from when he was a youth of fifteen in 1835 until his death in 1875. “Strong’s diary,” continues Aaron,

is an astonishing literary achievement as well as a treasure trove for pillaging historians. To see him merely as a colorful eyewitness of his times, a source for pungent quotations, is grossly to undervalue him. He also happens to be the most readable and brilliant of the nineteenth-century American diarists..., a kind of novelist manqué, a satirist and humorist of high order, and an alert reporter in the tradition of Pepys, his self-acknowledged prototype. His unmatched forty-year commentary on wars, scandals, books, concerts, fires, fads, riots, social events, politics, and personalities reveals, as the critic P. A. Spaulding said, the “minor but unmistakable [*sic*] share of genius” that marks the work of the authentic diarist.¹⁹

¹⁶ Hazel Dicken-Garcia and Giovanna Dell-Orto, *Hated Ideas and the American Civil War Press* (Spokane, Washington: Marquette Books, LLC, 2008), 273.

¹⁷ Goodwin, 80. Seward (1801-1872) was former governor of New York, Secretary of State to Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson, and himself a candidate for the Republican nomination for the 1860 presidential election. Weed (1797-1882) was Seward’s principle political advisor.

¹⁸ Daniel Aaron, “The Great Diarist,” *American Heritage Magazine* 39.2 (March 1988).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Strong's observations proved invaluable to this study, not only in discovering the seminal events of the 1850s, but also as a collaborative source to support or counter the *Times* in focus, opinion and emphasis.

This study, then, is a look into the lives of the mid-nineteenth century New York public and is focused on supporting Potter's point that, for many people (as with New York City), there were other issues more important than sectionalism. The term "public" is of course quite a broad label, as who is included in this group is not entirely ascertainable. While circulation numbers exist, there is no real data available as to demographics of readers, and, as previously stated, nearly ninety-seven percent of New York was literate, it leaves a rather large group of possible readers. However, it can be generally assumed that economics would exclude a large part of the population from regularly purchasing newspapers (despite their penny price), that those whose professions allowed them shorter hours would have more time available to read, and those with more education would be most apt to read at the level that the papers wrote. So for this study, the "public" referred to is more correctly described as middle- to upper-class white-collar citizens, such as George Templeton Strong, who, indeed, documents reading the *Times* in his famous diary.

The coverage of the New York scene, for the purposes of clarity and cohesion, have been divided into three themes that best portray the city's society in the 1850s. The first of these is New York's efforts to be a leader in the international and modern world. By 1854, with the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act--the traditional beginning of the Civil War era and thus also the beginning of this study--the United States was a

meager seventy-eight years old, and constantly endeavoring to assert itself as an equal to its European counterparts. A large part of that effort was the drive to stand on par with western Europe in the areas of communications and economics. Efficiency in communications was necessary to stay abreast of both current events and economic concerns, including market changes. Modern transportation was required to compete in the lucrative international trade business with the likes of England and France, who had both been developing their navies and shipbuilding industries since well before American independence. New York City, as the nation's leading trade and manufacturing hub, was thus particularly concerned with communication and trade, a fact reflected in two topics in particular--the transatlantic telegraph and money and leisure--which garnered frequent attention in the *New York Times*.

The second theme surrounds New Yorkers' political and governmental concerns at the state and local level. Despite the national issues and those around the globe, New Yorkers were not so distracted by the outside world as to ignore the problems in their own backyard. On the contrary, local politics were very much the focus of the *Times* and its readers. City and state affairs continued a steady presence in the daily papers, and often in frank and unforgiving ways. Corruption and reform, along with violence and nativism, were topics frequented by the paper, and those deemed responsible for political evils did not escape the journalist's pen.

The third and final theme pertains to the societal concerns of New York's citizens. However focused New Yorkers were with politics, trade, wars, the economy, and other "official" business of the day, there was still room--substantial room it

seemed--for more sensational topics. The spectacle of Spiritualism, the debates over the temperance movement, and the sensational intrigue of individual scandals, all found their way onto the pages of the *New York Times* and into the gossip circles of its readership.

Together, these three themes constitute a wide-ranging picture of New York in the 1850s. In so doing, they also add weight to David Potter's assertion that there was more to the 1850s than sectional issues. This is not to suggest that the *New York Times* ignored reporting these national issues, or to suggest that New Yorkers were unconcerned with them. Many histories and studies have proven that these concerns--the Kansas-Nebraska Act, John Brown's raid, Abraham Lincoln's election, et cetera--were, of course, both hotly reported on by the press and ardently discussed by the public. This study does not dispute that fact either, but does hope to restore a balance to the history of the 1850s that takes into account the local concerns *along with* the national section ones.

Furthermore, while this thesis in no way argues that the *Times* failed to concern itself with the issues of slavery and the sectional crisis, it does suggest that the "side issues" on which this paper focuses were more frequently reported on than the majority of histories of the mid-nineteenth-century would suggest. In fact, these topics actually constituted more of the paper than did those of traditional pre-Civil War concerns. In a keyword search through the *Times* archive, articles containing the words "slavery" or "secession" were far outnumbered by the combined totals of those containing "theatre," "liquor," or "Irish," for example. The following table documents this keyword search,

displaying the number of articles appearing between May 30, 1854 (when President Pierce signed the Kansas-Nebraska Act into law) and December 24, 1860 (when South Carolina seceded from the Union).

Keyword	Number of Articles
Slavery and/or Sectional	7,002
Secede and/or Secession	862
TOTAL	7,864
Atlantic telegraph and/or Atlantic cable	672
Central Park	954
Fashion	1,448
Theatre	2,703
TOTAL	5,777
Catholic	2,175
Immigrant and/or Immigrants	401
Irish	2,618
Know-Nothing and/or Know-Nothings	1,874
Native American and/or Native Americans	174
Nativism and/or Nativist	11
TOTAL	7,253
Mayor	6,741
Governor	9,431
Riot and/or Mob	3,955
City Election and/or State Election	8,890
TOTAL	28,096
Murder	4,891
Burdell	295
Trial	9,198
Temperance and/or Liquor	3,660
Spiritualism and/or Spiritualist	238
TOTAL	18,282

Fig. 1. Comparison of Sectional and Non-Sectional Articles in the *New York Times*

Of course, this is not a perfect comparison of sectional and non-sectional topics. A “riot” article could concern a slave riot in the South, just as a “trial” could focus on that of a disgruntled slave owner. However, this does not significantly detract from the actual obvious predominance of non-sectional issues permeating the pages of the *New York Times* in the years leading up to the Civil War.

BRIEF HISTORY OF NEW YORK

In his *Coningsby, or, The New Generation*, Benjamin Disraeli noted that “A great city, whose image dwells in the memory of man, is the type of some great idea. Rome represents conquest; Faith hovers over the towers of Jerusalem; and Athens embodies the pre-eminent quality of the antique world, Art.”²⁰ New York City may have been left off that list, surely not in question of its greatness, but perhaps because it is near impossible to pin only one idea on a city so varied. Through power shifts, wars, prosperity and depression, New York has represented more than simply a locale. Its rise from humble beginnings to international power has been a paradigm of the American experience.

The city’s history began with an initial failure, when in 1609 the *Halve Maen*, a Dutch carrack commissioned by the Dutch East India Company, abandoned its attempts to find the same supposed Arctic pass to the Indies that Giovanni da

²⁰ Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield, K.G., *Coningsby, or The New Generation*, 5th ed. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1891).

Verrazzano had failed to locate eighty years earlier.²¹ Instead, its skipper, Englishman Henry Hudson, charted the river that now bears his name, and began a trading relationship with the native Lenapes Indians. What the East India Company saw as a disappointment, however, some smaller merchants quickly saw as an opportunity to corner the European market in furs. In 1614, the United New Netherland Company was given exclusive rights to traffic in American pelts, quickly sending out four more expeditions and establishing the permanent fortified trading post of Fort van Nassouwen, near modern-day Albany. The following year, a second trading post was erected on “the Island Manhattans.”²²

When the rights to New Netherland and the fur trade were handed over to the newly-formed Dutch West India Company in 1621, its agents wasted no time in sending traders and dozens of colonizing families to protect their North American interests. Subsequent years saw ship after ship stocked with colonists, livestock and supplies deposited in New Netherland, which in 1625 officially became headquartered at New Amsterdam, a mason-walled fortification erected on Manhattan’s southern tip. Yet not all the colonists were Dutch; perhaps as many as half were Swedes, Germans, French, Belgians, Africans, Danes, and, increasingly, English. Their presence, along with

²¹ For a broad history of the East India Company, see Brian Gardner’s *The East India Company: A History* (New York: The McCall Publishing Company, 1971).

²² Burrows, 14-19.

intensified agitations and conflict with the native peoples, did not lend itself to the company's ability to retain the area as a Dutch colony.²³

Once their last Brazilian stronghold fell back into Portuguese hands in 1654, the Dutch turned their full attention towards New Amsterdam, initiating a substantial colonization campaign and instituting the Atlantic slave trade as a focal point of the expanding the town's economy. The campaign worked, and the colony's population skyrocketed from less than three hundred in 1626 to thirty-five hundred by the mid-1650s, and a healthy nine thousand a decade later. Yet this may have contributed to West India Company's own demise. The new colonists were, in the words of then-governor Peter Stuyvesant, drawn to "an imaginary liberty in a new and, as some pretend, a free country," resulting in a more diverse, secular and lawless populace.²⁴ For a time the Netherlands' States-General considered revoking the Company's charter, as it appeared it was no longer capable of controlling its investment. However, that threat fell by the wayside as the Dutch were soon distracted by the outbreak of naval warfare with England.²⁵

Although the first Anglo-Dutch war ended in the summer of 1654 with no clear-cut victor and New Amsterdam still in Dutch hands, a changing of the guard in England soon ended any hopes of lasting peace. The Restoration in 1660 reinstated the Stuarts to the English throne, bringing Charles II and his ambitious brother James, the

²³ Ibid., 19-37.

²⁴ Ibid., 57.

²⁵ Ibid., 37-63.

duke of York, to power. Within months of the Restoration, the parliament of Charles II adopted a second Navigation Act aimed at restricting Dutch trade between the North American colonies and Europe, and James was appointed proprietor of all the territory surrounding New Netherland. Acquisition of the Dutch lands was vital, it was reasoned, because a takeover of New Netherland would unite the settlements within New England and the Chesapeake under British rule, and gaining New Amsterdam would allow English control over the Hudson-Champlain corridor to Montreal. Stuyvesant tried to resist, but was in no position to ward off a full scale attack from the British. On September 8, 1664, after a futile four-day standoff, Colonel Richard Nichols raised the British flag and declared that both New Netherland and New Amsterdam would thereafter be known as New York.²⁶

With the advent of British rule came an influx of prosperous British merchants, eager to claim their share of the New World's economic possibilities. By 1684, some eighty ships and boats were owned by the port and carried cargos in excess of fifty thousand pounds. The economy may have been booming but so was discontent, as the city's growing pains kept hopes for a stable society elusive. Remaining Dutch settlers resisted British culture and continued to act according to Dutch decorum in open defiance of the imposed Dominion government. Religion was also a hotly contested issue and often erupted in violence, such as with Jacob Leisler's Rebellion in 1690.²⁷

²⁶ Ibid., 63-73.

²⁷ George Brown Tindall and David Emory Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, 5th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 171. In light of England's Glorious Revolution a Protestant group in New York, led by German immigrant Jacob Leisler, deposed the lieutenant governor and assumed the

Piracy too became a danger as New York's imports and exports grew, and trials of pirates such as Captain William Kidd captivated the public. Neither was New York immune to the woes of their governing nation.²⁸ When Queen Anne's War erupted between England and France in 1702, nearly thirty New York ships--roughly one-fourth of the port's total--were captured by the French.²⁹

The New York economy, however, continued to grow in the 1720s as the city became an integral part of the West Indian sugar trade. By the early years of the eighteenth century half of the ships entering or leaving the port of New York were on route to or from the Caribbean, and since West Indian plantations concentrated on only lucrative cane instead of food production or manufacturing, New York became their source for flour, corn, pork, beef, lumber and other necessities that made life possible. New York's economic fortunes flowed alongside the harvest of sugar cane, and soon one out of every four or five adult male residents earned his living as a mariner. The increase in trade also initiated a boom in taverns, coffeeshops, municipal markets and retail stores, and created demand for those in the banking and legal professions and for skilled artisans and tradespeople. It did, however, also dramatically increase the

office pending word from England. Leisler kept New York under control for the next two years with the help of the militia. When England finally appointed a new governor, Leisler was reluctant to handover power, was thus charged with treason, and hanged. "For years to come Leisler and anti-Leisler factions would poison the political atmosphere of New York."

²⁸ A synopsis of the wars in America prior to the Revolution is available in Howard Henry Peckham's *The Colonial Wars, 1689-1762* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964).

²⁹ Burrows, 73-116.

frequency of epidemic diseases, as outbreaks of smallpox, malaria, and yellow fever, among others, were carried on ships from the islands.³⁰

New York's ties to the West Indies also brought with it an intensified presence of slavery. Prior to the eighteenth century, slavery had never really taken hold in New York. Population rates of enslaved peoples was always much lower than those of free white immigrants (unlike in the West Indies, which absorbed 1.2 million slaves between 1700 and 1775 while the white population decreased over the same time period). Yet, as New York's inhabitants became wealthier, the demand for servile labor grew, and the connection with the West Indies afforded easy access to cheap labor. While only three hundred slaves were counted in New Amsterdam during the British changeover in 1664, nearly a thousand existed in 1712--some fifteen percent of the population. By 1746 that number had grown to 2,440 slaves--about twenty-one percent of the population--giving New York City the highest concentration of slaves north of Virginia. The same demand for servile labor that supported the slave trade, however, also spurred a new wave of immigrants from Europe drawn to New York by the availability of work and possibilities of apprenticeships.³¹

The middle of the eighteenth century found New York embroiled in over two decades of war and conflict. King George's War, which began in 1739 between England and Spain, had engulfed Prussia, France and, consequently, America by 1743. Fighting ended in 1748 with no established victor, and soon lingering hostilities segued into the

³⁰ Ibid., 116-125.

³¹ Ibid., 125-166.

French and Indian War. By 1761 the French had been expelled from India and Canada and had lost valuable sugar islands in the West Indies. Throughout the series of conflicts, New York was kept on constant alert due to its proximity to Canada, and French raiders reached as far south as Saratoga and Albany. While the colonial wars allowed many New York City merchants and privateers to make a fortune in dealing supplies, they also put Britain deeply in debt, and initiated the series of taxations on Americans that would eventually push the colony towards revolution.³²

Whereas Boston was seen by many as the hub of American dissidence, New York was conversely regarded as a bastion of British loyalty. As the Continentals braced for a British invasion, Manhattan was transformed into Fort Washington and occupied by over ten thousand men. By the end of August 1776, the British occupied Staten Island, Brooklyn, and Long Island, finally expelling the last of General Washington's forces that November.³³ While the loss of New York did not doom the revolution, as history clearly shows, it did make obtaining independence more difficult: the Continentals lost thirty-six hundred men to death, four thousand to capture, and countless more to desertion in trying to defend the city. New York remained occupied for the remainder of the war, and by the time the British left in 1783 the city was in state of near ruin from fire and neglect.³⁴

³² Ibid., 116-219.

³³ For more information regarding the British invasion of New York and Washington's escape see chapters four and five of David McCullough's *1776* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2005), 115-197.

³⁴ Burrows, 219-261.

New Yorkers soon assumed the task of rebuilding both their city and their economy. New trade routes were opened to Russia and China, and Alexander Hamilton's push for a national bank (along with a New York branch, which Hamilton was against) came to fruition. The Bank of the United States was created in February 1791 after much deliberation, and shares jumped in value from twenty-five dollars in July to 170 dollars in October. Despite a panic in 1792 that caused a significant drop in bank stock prices, New York enjoyed economic prosperity thanks to the very thing that took it away: war. During the French Revolution and subsequent Napoleonic Wars, the city captured a significant share of the international carrying trade. The value of its imports ballooned from \$1.4 million in the early 1790s to \$7.6 million in 1807, while that of exports likewise rose from \$2.5 million to \$26 million during the same years. While the 1790 city directory listed only 248 merchants, there were eleven hundred listed by 1800, a mere ten years later.³⁵

This prosperity also allowed New Yorkers a certain level of refinement. They indulged in fashionable clothing and accessories, powders and perfumes, wigs and walking sticks. Coachmakers, elocutionists, music teachers, dentists, and singing and dancing masters all gained in popularity and importance. Private drinking and eating clubs and various literary and scientific societies became popular, as did the theater. The society of New York was split, however, between two different camps: the Knickerbockers and the Yankees. The Knickerbockers were comprised of old-stock Anglo-Dutch and Huguenot bluebloods who were mostly Episcopalian, while Yankees

³⁵ Ibid., 265-335.

were the relatively recent New England arrivals who wholly backed Evangelical reform and tended toward Presbyterianism.³⁶

This increasing refinement only heightened the growing disparity among New York's classes. The burgeoning economy had once again spurred a surge in immigration, not only from Europe but from within America. New Englanders from various points poured into the city, as did Scots, English, Irish and French, looking to make their fortunes. Free blacks also searched for their place in the city, as John Jay and the Manumission Society had pushed an emancipation bill through the legislature in 1799 (this was, however, a gradual emancipation plan, and by 1810 eight-four percent of the nearly nine-thousand New York blacks were free). Charity became a notable endeavor of the privileged class, with the various efforts aimed particularly at widows and children (whereas men were considered to be creators of their own misfortune and therefore did not merit such charity). Popular organizations so involved included the New York Free School Society, which strove to end crime and pauperism by indoctrinating the city's poor children with proper social behavior and work ethic, and the Orphan Asylum Society. Still, charity was not enough to even the playing field. By the turn of the nineteenth century the richest twenty percent of New York owned eighty percent of the city's wealth, whereas the bottom half held only five percent.³⁷

³⁶ Ibid., 335-385, 452-472.

³⁷ Ibid., 337-352.

Residents were also split on the impending conflict with Britain, the War of 1812.³⁸ The upper classes, wary of risking their investments, were not in favor of a declaration of war, while the plebeians of the city signed up for the military in droves. City gangs even took it upon themselves to attack ships of the Spanish and Portuguese-- Britain's allies--at dockside. By the summer of 1814 the city was bracing for what was assumed to be an imminent invasion, with citizens contributing over a thousand hours of free labor in constructing forts, blockhouses, felling trees and digging trenches. However, the war came to an end in February 1815 when the British, after losing at the Battle of Lake Champlain, turned back and left New York untouched. And yet, while the British and French closed the West Indies to American trade in the aftermath of the war, their efforts only spurred New Yorkers towards other endeavors. In attempts to maintain the movement and trade of goods even in the face of a blockade, canal building became big business.³⁹ The most noted of these, the Erie Canal, which linked the Hudson River to Lake Erie when completed in 1825, opened up the western interior to migration and more efficient good transport.⁴⁰

The railway boom of 1830s saw the lifestyles for many improve, but not for all. The working classes witnessed a deterioration in their living standards, as speculators and landlords found little profit in building proper housing for the poor. The cramp,

³⁸ For an account of the War of 1812, see Walter R. Boreman's *1812: the War That Forged a Nation* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2004).

³⁹ Burrows, 409-451.

⁴⁰ Ronald E. Shaw, *Canals for a Nation: The Canal Era in the United States, 1790-1860* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1990), 42.

filthy living conditions only served to foster the spread of diseases, such as cholera, which in 1832 claimed the lives of over thirty-five hundred New York City residents. The epidemic did, nonetheless, seem to highlight the substandard conditions of the poor, and the city set out to improve access to clean water, seen mostly markedly by the construction of the Croton Water Aqueduct. The cramped living conditions also cultivated the great fire of 1835. On a freezing December night, a broken gas line ignited by a coal stove started a fire that by its end had engulfed 674 buildings, cost \$26 million dollars in damage, and threw twenty-three of the city's twenty-six fire insurance companies into bankruptcy. Although the burned-out area was rebuilt bigger and better within five years, fire would continue to threaten the city throughout its development.⁴¹

The general economic prosperity of the first third of the ninetieth century came to crashing halt in 1837, when a financial panic quickly translated to a full-blown depression. The panic had several origins--President Jackson's decision to revoke the Bank of the United States' charter and funnel federal funds into state banks; an inevitable correction to the massive inflation caused by private bankers and their paper money; the Bank of England's restriction of loans to American merchants--and the result was dramatic. Values of real estate plummeted, railroad and canal construction fell by the wayside, and worker wages (for those finding work at all) dropped by roughly one-third.

⁴¹ Burrows, 587-602.

New York's fiscal revival would this time come at the hands of the steamship industry, which after the first successful transatlantic voyage in 1838, became the travel mode of choice for both commerce and passengers. While the port of New York served as a stop along the way for British ships for over a decade, New York's own steamship industry finally materialized in 1848 with the United States Mail Steamship Company.⁴² The discovery of California gold in 1848 gave the steamships even more to transport than just mail, ferrying both passengers and products to the profitable market in San Francisco. This, combined with a renewed interest in the railway, secured New York's position as the nation's leading manufacturing center by midpoint of the nineteenth century.⁴³

This study thus opens with New York City as a center of culture and industry, and making its mark on the international stage. By 1850, over three thousand ships arrived annually in New York's harbor from more than 150 different foreign ports, and with them came half of the United States' imports. Over fifteen thousand vehicles--horsedrawn wagons, carts, and carriages--rumbled past the corner of Broadway and Fulton every day. By the close of the decade, Manhattan alone housed 4,375 manufacturing establishments, accounting for 90,204 workers. Along with industry came other activity, with hotels and retail stores popping up all over the city and in grand fashion; the upper echelons of New York's society had a seemingly insatiable

⁴² For in-depth information on the Atlantic steamship trade, see Stephen Fox's *Transatlantic: Samuel Cunard, Isambard Brunel, and the Great Atlantic Steamships* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003).

⁴³ Burrows, 603-651.

appetite for luxury. The city's production of goods was sustained by the near infinite workforce that came pouring into its neighborhoods. Between 1840 and 1859, the United States was inundated by 4,242,000 immigrants, and three out of every four of them entered through the port of New York. The city was a burgeoning metropolis and nearly bursting at the seams, and despite the well-documented sectional conflicts at the national level during the 1850s, New York had also more than its fair-share of local concerns. This study offers a brief look at a few of those concerns in this most multifaceted city during the decade prior to the American Civil War.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 652-673, 712-737.

II. MODERN CITY IN A MODERN WORLD

ATLANTIC TELEGRAPH

“The memory of such an achievement the world should not let die.”¹ That is what Henry M. Field wrote at the beginning of his record of his brother Cyrus’s work on the Atlantic telegraph. In modern times, the antiquated system of telegraphy seems a complicated, cumbersome form of communication. But to Americans of the nineteenth-century, it was an amazing remedy for the isolation of their vast continent from the established empires of Europe, and validated the young country’s position as a growing world power. New York City, in particular, having lost the position of capital to Washington and in heavy competition with the harbor at Boston, saw the telegraph as a way of asserting its position at the forefront of the nation and the world at large.

In March of 1843, after years of lobbying and an eagerness to be able to learn the news from next year’s party conventions in Baltimore, Maryland, Congress appropriated thirty thousand dollars to Professor Samuel Finley Breese Morse to build an electromagnetic telegraph line between Baltimore and Washington, D.C. On May 24, 1844, three days before the start of the Democratic convention, Morse transmitted the now famous message “WHAT HATH GOD WROUGHT,” from the chambers of the United States Supreme Court to his associate Alfred Vail, forty miles away in

¹ Henry M. Field, *The Story of the Atlantic Telegraph* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1893), iii.

Baltimore.² The chamber soon became Washington's hot ticket, as reporters and Congressmen alike battled for entrance to await up-to-the-minute news of the convention.

The telegraph, unlike its later successor the telephone, was used primarily for commercial rather than social purposes. Its value quickly became apparent to newspapers when the war with Mexico began in 1846. Prior to the start of the war, only 146 miles of telegraph lines existed in the United States, and none were south of Richmond. Yet the hunger for war news spurred demand, and by 1850 ten thousand miles of wire blanketed the country, stretching as far south as New Orleans and soon to reach California. The telegraph was also quickly tapped to aid in transportation, as assisting trains in scheduling to avoid collisions, and in finance, by transmitting the prices of stocks and commodities and connecting borrowers with lenders. Yet the effects of the telegraph were farther reaching than simple conveniences. As Daniel Walker Howe notes, "the spread of the electric telegraph effectively decoupled communication from transportation, sending a message from sending a physical object. The implications of this alteration in the human condition unfolded only gradually over the next several generations. But contemporaries fully realized that they stood in the presence of a far-reaching change. They valued not only the shortening of time to receive information, but also the speed with which an answer could be returned; that is,

²Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 691. The line was only partially built in time for the Whig convention at the beginning of May 1844. Instead Vail heard the news from the train station at Annapolis Junction and telegraphed it ahead to Washington. The news arrived an hour and half before the train would, and it was through this manner that Washington learned of Henry Clay's nomination.

conversation was possible.”³ This opening of conversation saw to further American nationalism and continental ambition, as it was assumed that a country so great as to create the telegraph could easily attain the Manifest Destiny it so desperately sought.

Morse was hailed as the “inventor” of the telegraph, although that was not entirely true. While Morse had created the simplest and most effective telegraph to date, its forerunners had existed for several decades. The first telegraph line was created by Spain’s Dr. M. de F. Salvá in 1796, which used an electric spark to transmit messages over the twenty-six mile wire between Madrid and Aranjuez. The machine, however, produced mostly incoherent messages and was deemed unviable for popular use, as Salvá was the only one who understood how the device worked. In 1798 Italy’s Alessandro Volta introduced the world’s first battery, an instrument that could produce current electricity. In 1809, the German Samuel T. Sömmering designed a chemical telegraph in Munich that contained twenty-six wires--one for each letter of the alphabet--immersed in water that formed bubbles when a current pulsed through it. The method failed to be practical due to the painstaking difficulty in recording a message. An 1816 invention by England’s Sir Frances Ronalds was likewise disregarded as impractical, as it used static electricity to swing light pithballs across a line, revealing letters behind them. These experiments, combined with Danish physicist Hans Christian Oersted’s

³ Ibid., 696

1820s discovery of electromagnetism and Russia's Baron von Schilling's use of a coded alphabet in 1834, gave Morse the knowledge he needed to create his own device.⁴

Just as his predecessors inspired Morse, so did Morse inspire Cyrus W. Field. Field, a businessman by trade, was intrigued by Morse's work and inspired by communications progress made in Europe. In 1851, two brothers, John and Jacob Brett, succeeded in laying the first working submarine cable through the twenty-two mile English Channel between England and France, connecting Great Britain to mainland Europe for the first time since the ice age. Within three years telegraph cables existed from England to Holland and Ireland, and Italy to Corsica and Sardinia. Encouraged, Field then made the radical decision to attempt a cable across the Atlantic Ocean to end America's isolation. Today this may not seem like a particularly drastic undertaking, yet this endeavor represented quite a leap from the efforts in Europe. The longest submarine cable in operation spanned only 110 miles and sank to depths of only three hundred fathoms, whereas an Atlantic cable would have to extend more than two thousand miles in length and upwards of twenty-six hundred fathoms.⁵

Field, whose paper company made him a fortune during the boom of the penny press, gathered a group of four like-minded men--industrialist Peter Cooper, ironmaster Abram Hewitt, banker Moses Taylor, and Morse--who subscribed \$1.5 million for the project. Encouraged by the navy's discovery of a shallow submarine plateau between

⁴ Chester G. Hearn, *Circuits in the Sea: The Men, the Ships, and the Atlantic Cable* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 2-4.

⁵ John Steele Gordon, *A Thread Across the Ocean: The Heroic Story of the Transatlantic Cable* (New York: Walker & Company Publishing, 2002), 10-12. A fathom equals six feet, therefore three hundred fathoms equals 1800 feet.

Ireland and Newfoundland, the men mapped out their route, and in 1854 hacked an eight-foot-wide path through four hundred miles of Canadian wilderness in order to link St. John's, Newfoundland with Nova Scotia (then the terminus of established U.S. telegraph lines). The men, excluding Morse, also established the American Telegraph Company the following year to expand their monopoly over the U.S. network, quickly buying up smaller lines so that by the end of the decade their company extended from Maine down to the Gulf of Mexico.

When it was decided that the first eighty-five mile link of the Atlantic cable would be laid through St. Lawrence Bay between Port aux Basques and Cape Breton in August of 1855, Field celebrated the occasion with great fanfare. Chartering a luxury steamer, the *James Adger*, to follow along the cable ship, the *Sarah Bryant*, Field invited the company's directors, families, friends, reporters, scientists and even a few clergymen as a blessing on the endeavor. One of the reporters gave accounts to the *New York Times*, which ran them as front page news. The column described the event in near biblical terms: "We were a pleasant crew bound on a great expedition. To lay the first link of that great transatlantic wire on which thought will incessantly travel three years hence; to bind the two Hemispheres together, with a mystic band, through which, as through the connection link of the Siamese Twins, all vitality will ebb and flow from new World to Old, and from Old World to New."⁶ The rest of the account reads as one of a social event, the author naming various passengers, their attire and disposition.

⁶ The *New York Times*, "The Ocean Telegraph," published August 18, 1855, 1.

Filled with excitement, the reporter promises to write again with another account “which shall be, if possible, more brilliant than this one.”⁷

The second correspondence, published three weeks later, was decidedly less brilliant. “Every heart,” noted the *Times* journalist, “was brim full of anxiety. It was no common loss that all sorrowed over by anticipation. One of the arteries of civilization was about to be severed.”⁸ Field’s experiment in submarine cables had turned into an experiment in Murphy’s Law. Delays from fog and winds hindered their efforts, and questionable captaining caused the two ships to collide, wander off course, and subsequently run out of enough cable to complete the distance. Field, for his part, was not blamed for the failure. “There was no one on board any of those ships,” assured the journalist, “that witnessed this sad sacrifice but felt real sorrow for the cause of humanity and those gentlemen who had made such earnest efforts to promote it.”⁹ Instead the blame was put squarely on the shoulders of secondary characters, who, according to the account, did everything from not properly choosing the season to not appropriately provisioning the ships. In the end, Field and his company had lost \$350,000 on the expedition.¹⁰

While Field may have retained the respect of the press, his mission seemed to have lost their vote of confidence. The next story of significance in the *Times* pertaining

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ The *New York Times*, “The Submarine Telegraph,” published September 6, 1855, 1.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Hearn, 31-34.

to the construction of the Atlantic cable appeared nearly two years later and regarded it as little more than a notable business transaction.¹¹ The June 29, 1857 article ran only the specifics of the aid received from various countries, and not much else. Gone was the fanfare and front page fascination of previous trials, and Field's next attempt was approached much more cautiously than the first. One earlier article noted that the cable "begins to assume the appearance of success," not willing to go out on a limb to declare success eminent, or even possible.¹² A subsequent article in August, running on page five, was even less optimistic in explaining the mapping of the Atlantic sea floor and that "its returns will depend, in no small degree, the success or failure of the Atlantic Telegraph."¹³ No longer was the success of the telegraph assumed, and subsequent articles highlighted any failures or setbacks the enterprise experienced. As one letter to the editor published that same month expressed, "The parting of the Atlantic Cable has been duly heralded in the morning papers, and amid the universal regret prevailing we hear numerous declarations by various individuals of its being just what they expected, and that the success of the project is out of the question."¹⁴

This "regret" felt in the press may explain their surprise to report the news of the cable's completion. "We are enabled to lay before our readers, this morning," wrote the *Times*, "the gratifying and somewhat unexpected intelligence of *the success of the Atlantic*

¹¹ Several previous articles appeared in December of 1856 and during the early months of 1857 that noted the securing of capital and various preparations for the intended cable, but not until June did reports come in on the working attempts to construct the cable.

¹² The *New York Times*, "The Atlantic Telegraph," December 23, 1856, 4.

¹³ The *New York Times*, "The Sounding for the Atlantic Telegraph," August 11, 1857, 5.

¹⁴ The *New York Times*, "The Atlantic Telegraph-Suggestions," August 28, 1857, 5.

Telegraph Enterprise."¹⁵ The front page of the *Times* boomed with headlines declaring "THE GREAT EVENT OF THE AGE" and "Great Rejoicings Throughout Canada and the United States."¹⁶ These rejoicings were documented for thirty different cities--one hundred guns fired in Chicago; bonfires and fireworks in Harrisburg; bells rung and cannon fired in Portland, Maine; and citizens "wild with excitement" in Albany. To some cities the news was so shocking that excitement lost ground to disbelief. The reporter from Rutland, Vermont, noted that "The news of the successful laying of the Atlantic Cable is received here with feelings of suspicion. The *Rutland Courier* is out with the dispatch in an extra, but very few believe a word of it."¹⁷ The near-biblical reflection that had permeated the papers during the initial attempts of the telegraph, and that had been lost during its many failures, now returned with gusto. "We wish that Heaven had made us poetical," proclaimed the *Times*, "that we might raise a song of triumph on the success of one of the noblest works that ever the mind of man conceived or that his hand could execute It would be impossible to overrate the importance of this great--we had almost said greatest of events. Providence has indeed been kind to us. Now, as ever, let our gratitude, though it can never be commensurate with the boon conceded, swell our bosoms with thankfulness *in excelsior.*"¹⁸

¹⁵ *The New York Times*, "The News of the Day," August 6, 1858, 4.

¹⁶ *The New York Times*, "Latest By Telegraph," August 6, 1858, 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

The jubilations continued as the telegraph's success monopolized the *Times'* front page for days afterward. The paper continued to publish numerous accounts of celebration, but acknowledged that "[t]he columns of the *Times* would be insufficient for the accommodation of a tenth part of the expressions of enthusiastic rejoicing over the success of the Cable, which reach us from all parts of the country." Along with a lengthy explanation of the telegraph's history, interworking, and a topographic map of the sea floor, the paper also printed Field's correspondence with President Buchanan, who hoped the telegraph would "prove instrumental in promoting perpetual peace and friendship between kindred nations."¹⁹ The telegraph officially opened on August 16, when Queen Victoria sent the first transatlantic telegraph message to President Buchanan: "Her Majesty desires to congratulate the President upon the successful completion of this great international work, in which the Queen has taken deepest interest."²⁰ Buchanan, in part relied, "The President cordially reciprocates the congratulations of Her Majesty, the Queen, on the success of the great international enterprise accomplished by the science, skill, and indomitable energy of the two countries. It is a triumph more glorious, because far more useful to mankind, that was ever won by conqueror on the field of battle."²¹

For his part, Field received tributes worthy of a war hero. "Every great victory must have its hero," wrote the *Times* in his honor. "Wherever there is a Waterloo there

¹⁹ The *New York Times*, "Atlantic Telegraph," August 7, 1858, 5.

²⁰ The *New York Times*, "The Ocean Telegraph," August 17, 1858, 1.

²¹ *Ibid.*

must be a Wellington, and in such a victory as has been achieved in the Atlantic Telegraph there must have been a leader to whose courage and generalship the world is indebted for the completion of that stupendous work."²² Yet the celebrations and accolades may have come too soon. The cable soon faltered, and the last intelligible message was sent on September 2, 1858. The failure was eventually blamed on Field's associate applying too much voltage to the cable in attempts to speed up response times. Having never opened for commercial business, the cable was then thought by some to be a hoax from the start, and Field was quickly accused of misleading stockholders. The cable would not see lasting success until 1866, when materials had much improved and when the public had recovered confidence in the project that had been lost in 1858.²³ Still, the initial success of the Atlantic telegraph, no matter how fleeting, represented a great achievement of science and technology, one that shortened the distance between North America and Europe, and one that reaffirmed New York City as the effective "capital" of the United States.

MONEY & LEISURE

New York's harbor, with the Statue of Liberty towering over the entrance, has been a vital part of the city's iconography, yet its economic vitality took more time and effort to realize. Yet with concerted efforts and no small amount of luck, New Yorkers

²² The *New York Times*, "The Man of the Time," August 10, 1858, 4.

²³ Hearn, 127-134.

brought themselves to the forefront of the world's economy. Once there, the citizens of the city had no trouble displaying their triumph in the form of merchandise and public works, all which shaped the city and, to a large extent, the country as a whole.

The big event in New York on April 23, 1838, was the arrival of the *Sirius*, a small paddlewheel steam packet which had spent the last nineteen days chugging across the ocean from Cork. The ship's appearance elicited cheers from those gathered in the crowd, who rejoiced that New York had now established a maritime steam link with Europe. Transatlantic crossings in sailing ships could take months, and the speed of steamships offered a partial remedy to American isolation.²⁴ Along with the developments of the telegraph and the railways, "geographical size of the capitalist economy could suddenly multiply as the intensity of its business transactions increased. The entire globe became part of this economy. This creation of a single expanded world is probably the most significant development of our period."²⁵ Yet New York was not the initial benefactor of this newly emerging economy. The triumph of the *Sirius* was marred by the fact that she was an English ship, and no American steamship industry had yet materialized. Even more, when Samuel Cunard began twice-monthly transatlantic steamer service out of Liverpool in 1840, he chose Boston as the lines terminus, and even when service was extended to the Hudson River, he built his piers in New Jersey. Even in 1845, when the United States Congress began providing

²⁴ Burrows, 649.

²⁵ E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital, 1848-1875* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 33.

subsidies for steamships that carried the mail and could be used by the navy in wartime, still no American competitor emerged.

Finally, in 1848, Edward Knight Collins, a New York packet operator, vowed to build the biggest and fastest steamships on the water. After raising over a million dollars from New York merchant bankers and winning a mail contract from the government, Collins formed the United States Mail Steamship Company. His company's first transatlantic run in 1851, with its new steamship *Pacific*, made landfall in Liverpool in a record nine days and twenty hours. An impressed and grateful Congress raised Collins's annual subsidy from \$385,000 to \$853,000. The press delighted in the proceedings, and began following the crossing of the ships as if they were in a horse race. "The New York newspapers joyfully published the times of each passage of the rival liners, drew up averages, and revelled [*sic*] in statistics to their hearts' content. No longer were runs simply recorded in days, which had been enough in the packet era--the new figures gave the precise number of hours and minutes."²⁶ Yet Collins's company was never a money maker. Due to lower wages in England, Collins's costs were always higher than Cunard's, and the Collins Line was eventually put under completely after disasters involving two of his five ships.²⁷

Feverish attempts to break record after record in speed lead the Collins line irresponsible actions. On September 27, 1854, the *Arctic*, speeding through Cape Race off the coast of Newfoundland despite a dense fog, collided with the French steamer

²⁶ Robert Greenhalgh Albion, *The Rise of the New York Port, 1815-1860* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939), 327.

²⁷ Burrows, 650.

Vesta. While the *Vesta* was able to stay afloat, the *Arctic* was not so lucky. As the ship sank, mass confusion and panic, particularly on the part of the crew, caused many lifeboats to be wrecked in launching. Only two, carrying thirty-five crewmen and fourteen passengers, made it to Newfoundland, and only one other survivor was rescued from a raft. All told, 318 souls perished in the disaster, including Edward Collins's own wife, son and daughter.²⁸ The disparity between the number of crew and passengers saved was not lost on New Yorkers such as George Templeton Strong. "There is a very unpleasant disproportion between the number of the crew and of the passengers known to have been saved," wrote the diarist. "To be sure, self-preservation is the common instinct of waiter and fireman, Wall Street broker and Fifth Avenue millionaire, ... [b]ut it's hard to think of the scores of delicate women whose only chance of safety was thus destroyed, and who were left to perish without hope. It was the business of the officers to keep all hands under control and to provide what little help there was first for those who were least able to help themselves."²⁹

Less than a year and half later, on January 23, 1856, the *Pacific* sailed from Liverpool and was never seen from again. Carrying 240 passengers and crew, it was theorized that the ship hit an iceberg and sank while trying to beat Cunard's *Persia*, which was crossing at the same time and reported icebergs on the water.³⁰ Such incidents were the beginning of the end of the Collins Line. After the disappearance of

²⁸ Albion, 328.

²⁹ Strong, vol. II, 189.

³⁰ For more information on the California gold rush, see J.S. Holliday's *The World Rushed In: The California Gold Rush Experience* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981).

the *Pacific*, Congress reduced Collins's subsidies to its original \$385,000, before abandoning them altogether in 1858. The *Baltic* made the Collins Line's final crossing, sailing from Liverpool on February 3, 1858. "With that trip ended the spectacular attempt of New York and the American merchant marine to challenge the Cunarders. The line had never paid a cent in dividends; but for several years the American public had had keen pleasure in reading the speed statistics."³¹

The single biggest boost to New York's shipping industry actually came at the hands of California. The state's gold rush of 1849 created a great demand for both passenger transport and the movement of goods.³² California, previously home to a mere fourteen thousand inhabitants, saw its population soar to nearly one hundred thousand by the end of 1849 and to a quarter-million by 1852.³³ Not only did these treasure-seekers need passage, they also required the necessities to survive in California, and they were willing to pay an exorbitant amount to get them. Resourceful New York merchants soon discovered how much more money they could make by selling their goods to the forty-niners across the country. A barrel of flour that cost a mere five or six dollars in New York would fetch at least ten times that in California. New York's penny newspapers would sell for fifty cents to a dollar, even though they were several months old. One enterprising merchant, George A. Ward, for example,

³¹ Albion, 330.

³² Ibid., 62. Gold was actually discovered in January of 1848 by James Marshall at Sutter's Mill near Sacramento. News travelled across the United States by August and September but raised little interest and was generally perceived as a hoax or a case of over-exaggerated journalism. Not until it was confirmed by President Polk in his presidential message in December did the gold rush really get underway. Hence, gold-rushers are referred to as "forty-niners."

³³ Ibid., 62.

who sent a ship stocked with forty thousand dollars worth of goods saw a return of eighty thousand dollars in net profits.

The port of New York was the clear leader in this new west coast trade. Of the 775 mongrel vessels that left east coast ports bound for California, 214 were from New York, 151 from Boston, and no other port could claim more than 42.³⁴ “New York stood second only to London among all the seaports of world in the tonnage of its shipping by the middle of the nineteenth century. Liverpool might still have a greater volume of incoming and outgoing commerce; but it fell behind New York in the vessels which claimed it as a hailing port. By 1850, the aggregate of vessels with ‘of New York’ painted on their sterns exceeded the combined tonnage of Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New Orleans.”³⁵

Between 1849 and 1855, the world gold supply increased between six and sevenfold, and that swell in wealth was clearly visible among New York’s elites.³⁶ Moses Y. Beach, editor of *The Sun*, compiled an annual handbook between 1845 and 1855 that documented the affluence of the wealthy classes of the city. According to Beach, New York counted fourteen millionaires in 1846. Another nineteen had a reported half-million dollar fortunes, and another 137 at a quarter-million. Among New York City’s half-million inhabitants at the time, roughly one in five hundred were considered wealthy by Beach’s standards. By 1855, the number of millionaires had

³⁴ Ibid., 356.

³⁵ Ibid., 267.

³⁶ Hobsbawm, 34.

risen to twenty, and the other strata increased accordingly. The sources of this newfound wealth shifted from primarily finance and industry to commerce and real estate.³⁷ Yet it was not just the merchants who reaped the benefits. As James Livingston explains,

the real wages of the employed labor force on the farms and in the cities were increasing in the 1850s, but particularly for nonfarm workers. For the period 1840-60, there is related evidence to suggest that the proportion of earnings spent on the 'bare necessities' of food and shelter declined sharply, even though the reconstruction of the residential landscape--in both the towns and the countryside--was specific to the 1850s. This new distribution of expenditure was due in part to the total collapse of the supply of household-produced clothing by the late 1840s or early 1850s, which augmented the demand for 'ready-made' clothes accordingly. In that sense, the quantity of consumer expenditures increased insofar as the availability of goods and services came to be determined by, but also reduced to, what the market could accommodate in the form of commodities. Even so, the quantity and variety of consumer goods available through the market economy did increase enormously after the mid-1840s.³⁸

In the end, this meant that there were more people with more money to spend on goods, which, given the growing shipping industry, were more prevalent than ever.

This increase in consumer goods translated to an expansion of the retail shopping industry in New York City. The classic individual example of this is that of Alexander Turney Stewart, known as the "Merchant Prince." A Scotch-Irish immigrant, Stewart is credited with introducing to New Yorkers the revolution of the department store. "Almost every discussion of the wealth and global power of the United States mentions the fact that the American economy manifests its strength partly through the

³⁷ Albion, 259.

³⁸ James Livingston, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 30.

huge amounts of consumer goods available to its population.”³⁹ Most retail shops of the day carried a particularly small inventory, and turnover of new stock was painfully slow. Stewart decided that he must find a way to sell a greater variety of goods and sell them more quickly. Instead of bartering with customers to determine the price of a commodity, as was the usual tradition, Stewart presented his customers with regular and uniform prices.⁴⁰ He also discovered that selling many products at lower prices was more profitable than selling a few products at higher prices, also allowing for a quicker turnover of inventory.⁴¹ Stewart was an instant success, so much so that in 1846 he opened what was referred to as the “Marble Palace.” Equally close to wholesale clothing manufacturers, rail and ferry terminals, fashionable hotels and elite private residences, the Marble Palace was modeled after an Italian Renaissance palazzo, with its five stories organized around a large circular glass dome-covered court. Stewart especially tailored his store “to make shopping agreeable to women of the propertied classes: by hiring handsome young men as clerks, by advertising aggressively in ladies magazines, by staging the first American fashion shows, and by locating a ‘Ladies Parlor’ on the second floor featuring full-length Parisian mirrors.”⁴²

Stewart’s decision to pander to New York’s women was a key to his success, and indicative of the era. “The extravagant attire of New York socialites,” notes Douglas T.

³⁹ Stephen N. Elias, *Alexander T. Stewart: The Forgotten Merchant Prince* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1992), xi.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴¹ Burrows, 666-667.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 668.

Miller, “particularly the ladies, another visible indication of the great increase in wealth, was another symbol of status.”⁴³ Thus it is hardly surprising that later in the century stories would abound of Mary Todd Lincoln’s, wife of Abraham, spending habits in relation to the extreme focus the press put on her appearance. As Doris Kearns Goodwin noted, “Newspaper reports of her evening receptions invariably commented on every piece of her apparel.”⁴⁴ The following table, documenting the number of yards of specific types of fabric needed to create a single garment, demonstrates the grandiosity with which women’s fashions progressed during the first half of the nineteenth-century.

⁴³ Douglas T. Miller, *Jacksonian Aristocracy: Class and Democracy in New York, 1830-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 163.

⁴⁴ Goodwin, 682.

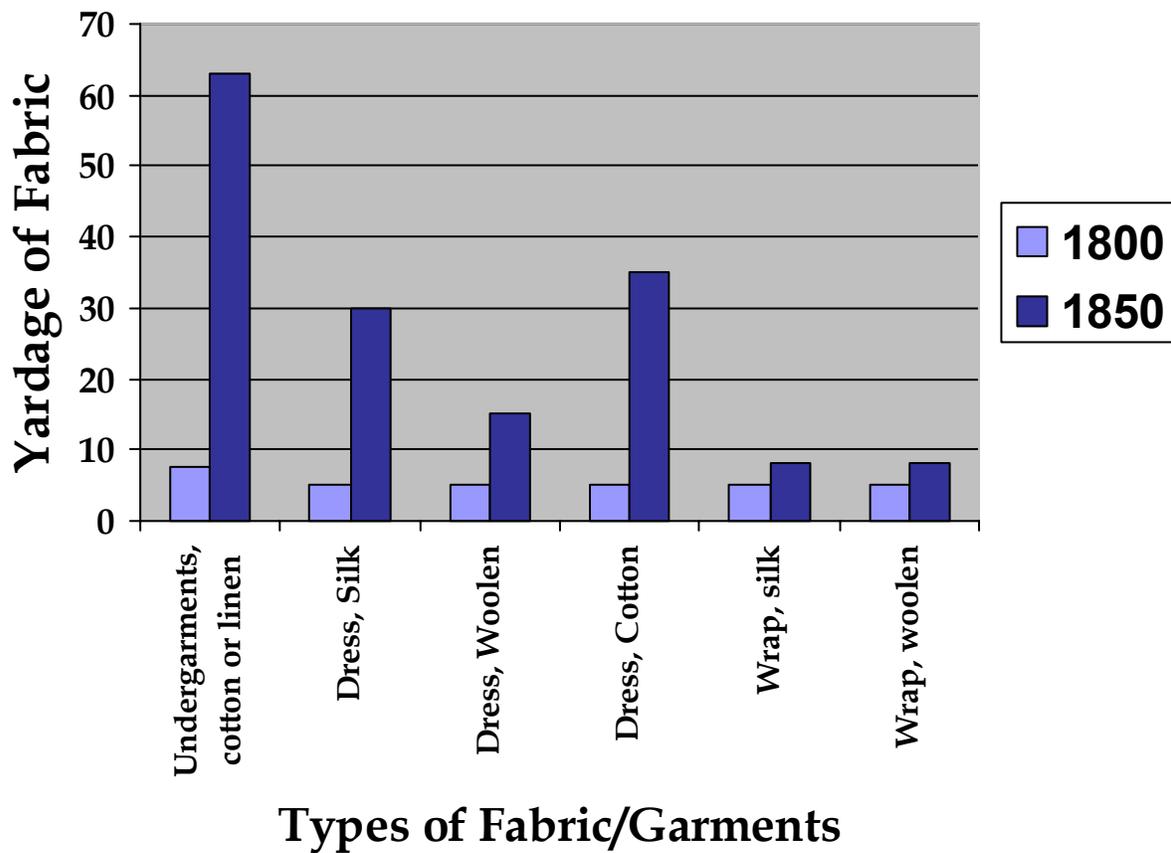


Fig. 2. Contrasting amounts of yardage needed to create garments for women in the year 1800 and 1850.⁴⁵

All told, the average dress requirement, including petticoat and undergarments, ballooned from approximately twelve yards in 1800 to nearly one hundred yards in 1855.

Such an activity did not escape the notice of the *New York Times*. On the contrary, it reported on fashion extensively, printing a monthly column on the clothing of the day; its detail upon elite fashions was quite surprising. “The dress was made

⁴⁵ Elias, 10. Although these figures seem excessive, they have been accepted and cited by several prominent historians, including Albion’s *The Rise of New York Port*. The original source of the information came from Lucy Barton’s *Historic Costume for the Stage* (Boston: Walter H. Baker Company, 1935).

with a plain skirt very full, but without flounces, the corsage quite plain and cut low, without any sleeves whatever. Over this is to be worn a high caraco, fitting close up to the throat, and composed of an entirely new description of black lace, the being of a check white, as pronounced as in any thicker material. The alternate squares of opaque and transparent black upon a fair skin have a most bewitching effect . . .,” and so on went the descriptions.⁴⁶ The paper was so interested in the fashions of the day that it expressed disappointment when disagreeable weather kept women indoors. “That miserable old howler, the god Æolus, with his griping Marall, Jack Frost, has kept all the delightful anticipations of fresh fashions under a cloud. The pretty bonnets are lying *perdu* in the milliner’s band-boxes, ready to be displayed at the first reliable symptoms of pleasant weather. The ladies, as one of the *artistes* exclaimed the other day, ‘will look perfectly stunning’ under the light of a Spring sun . . .”⁴⁷

The shopping exploits of England’s Queen Victoria and other dignitaries were documented in the *Times* as if aspects of official business. “It is the excitement that makes shopping delicious to [female sovereign], the excitement in looking for trimmings or ribbons ‘to match’ a dress or bonnet. The excitement on censuring the pattern of this, and finding fault with that of another article. The excitement on seeing that confusion worse confounded on the counter, that exertion to find, between a thousand patterns, patiently shown, the one which should ‘please her taste.’ I can

⁴⁶ The *New York Times*, “Interesting Extracts,” July 23, 1855, 2.

⁴⁷ The *New York Times*, “Fashions for March,” March 3, 1856, 2.

perfectly understand that excitement. It is essentially *womanish*.”⁴⁸ The Queen’s fashion was also acknowledged to be the authority on the subject. When the *Times* mentioned disliking a certain fashion trend, it noted that, as Queen Victoria was spotted sporting the trend, that “of course settles this matter, and we have not another word to say on the subject.”⁴⁹ Likewise, a change in fashion was reported as that of a military conflict. In one article, the author noted that “[t]here has been a sharp conflict all through May between furs and muslins, in which the furs seemed for some times likely to come off the winners. But the muslins are now in the ascendant, and there is a reasonable prospect that they will remain so for a couple of months at least.”⁵⁰ The *Times* was even so invested in the subject that it on occasion took it upon itself to issue fashion advice to its readers. While reporting that red petticoats had become the fashion of the day, the paper noted that while “we must yield to the dominant fashion” that a “softer and milder tint would be more becoming for Summer, let the case be as it may in Winter.”⁵¹ Likewise, the paper recalled having once glimpsed an embroidered white petticoat that, while acknowledging in their own humble opinion “that the snowy purity of dimity or muslin is much more likely to make a lasting impression on the masculine heart than the most brilliant scarlet that ever hung about a feminine ankle.”⁵²

⁴⁸ The *New York Times*, “London Gossip,” June 30, 1855, 2.

⁴⁹ The *New York Times*, “A Delicate Subject,” January 22, 1858, 4

⁵⁰ The *New York Times*, “The June Fashions,” June 1, 1857, 4.

⁵¹ The *New York Times*, “A Delicate Subject,” January 22, 1858, 4.

⁵² *Ibid.*

The *Times'* interest in fashion is not to say that it was above ridicule. The paper went so far as to declare particular fashions detrimental to the health of both sexes. "Precocious baldness and grayness too, it is believed, are attributable to the use of the present style of hat, which being impermeable, keeps the head at a high temperature, confining the insensible perspiration and animal heat while it is worn, and exposing the wearer to cold when it is removed."⁵³ Women, too, were "martyrs of no less fatal fashions." In copying the styles of Empress Eugenie of France, "[i]t is no uncommon thing to see instances of the most fool-hardy recklessness of health and comfort, especially in inclement weather, in the use of shoes as thin as paper, and as previous to cold and to dampness."⁵⁴ The paper was likewise critical of the level of opulence it was seeing amongst the American public. In reporting that a popular French preacher was sermonizing to his fellow Parisians against their indulgent lifestyles, the *Times* observed that a preacher of that nature could be of value on American shores. Besides noting that American lavishness was damaging to the nation's economy, as so many of the luxury goods were imported, but it concluded that "the worst of our imitations of French extravagances is, that we exaggerate to an absurd degree whatever we imitate. In dressing, dining, and all kinds of decorations we fairly outstrip all the rest of the world. Foreigners who come here filled with the impressions of Paris and London are completely astounded at the voluptuousness and costly brilliance of the external life. The straining for effect, the strife to out-shine, the labored efforts to outdo, which are so

⁵³ The *New York Times*, "Fashionable Covering for the Head and the Feet," September 27, 1854, 4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

painfully apparent everywhere, take away the breath of moderate men.”⁵⁵ Despite such warnings that American consumerism would bring down the economy, the *Times* continued to report enthusiastically on the fashions of the day and the New York public continued to purchase and display them.

An increase in consumer goods was not the only consequence of New York’s economic growth. Spaces and activities of leisure also became more prevalent and desirable. One such space was Central Park. Proposed in October of 1848 by landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing, it was thought by the proposer to provide a place where varying strata of classes could come together and regain a sense of community, a sense which was lacking in European countries currently in upheaval. “Such social intercourse, Downing believed, would, as reformers wished, uplift the lower orders. ‘Every laborer is a possible gentleman,’ Downing argued. It wanted only ‘the refining influence of intellectual and moral culture,’ which a park might make available, to raise up ‘the man of the working men to the same level of enjoyment with the man of leisure and accomplishment.’”⁵⁶ In 1851 James Beekman, a wealthy Whig state senator who owned property near the proposed park, introduced a bill to seize land by eminent domain. After more than two years of debate and accusations that the park was merely a ploy by real estate barons to increase their property values, 778 acres was seized by the state for the allocation of the park. Mayor Wood then also threw his support behind the park in his promises of city reform after his 1854 election. “There can be no doubt as

⁵⁵ The *New York Times*, “Our Extravagances,” April 28, 1856, 4.

⁵⁶ Burrows, 790.

to the necessity of some such part conveniently located on this island. In my opinion, future generations, who are to pay this expense, would have good reasons for reflecting upon the present generation, if we permitted the entire island to be taken possession of by population without some spot like this, devoted to rural beauty, healthful recreation, and pure atmosphere."⁵⁷

Work on Central Park was begun in 1856.⁵⁸ By the time the park was completed, over twenty thousand men had spent over five million dollars excavating and moving into the park nearly two and a half million cubic yards of stone and earth--enough to raise the level of a football field eighty stories high. Contractors supplied six million bricks, thirty-five thousand barrels of cement, sixty-five cubic yards of gravel, nineteen cubic yards of sand, and 166 tons of gunpowder--more than would be fired at the Battle of Gettysburg.⁵⁹ The park partially opened in December of 1858, when thousands of skaters showed up to enjoy the newly opened and frozen over Central Park Lake and its scenery despite the cold weather. The park would not be completed until 1866, but with this initial opening was deemed a glowing success.

The *Times*, for its part, gave unfettered support to the park and its creators throughout the building process. When charges of corruption threatened to delay the

⁵⁷ Mayor Fernando Wood qtd. in *The New York Times*, "City Reforms," January 12, 1855, 3.

⁵⁸ Design of the park was headed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. Olmsted, besides his accomplishments in landscape architecture, was also a journalist who, from 1852 to 1857, visited the Southern states on a commission for the *New York Times*. His reports remain the quintessential account of pre-Civil War Southern society. For this account, see Olmsted's *The Slave States*, ed. Harvey Wish (New York: Capricorn Books, 1959).

⁵⁹ Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), 150.

park's construction, the paper sarcastically wrote, "Amongst the serious drawbacks upon New-York as a residence for people who conceive that they were not sent upon earth wholly and solely for the purpose of making money--besides the dirt, the police, and the heavy taxation--is the want of any better place than the streets to ride or drive or walk in."⁶⁰ The paper believed that the municipal administration, working solely towards the interest of rowdies and blackguards, was attempting to ruin what could be the city's greatest asset. The park, "a large tract of most valuable land is about to be given up to it, in the hope that the citizens will find in it a place to ride on horseback, to drive in carriages, or walk on foot, as their fancy impels or their means allow them, free from dust and bad air, and with enough grass and foliage to relieve the eyes that have been strained all day by hard work."⁶¹

The *Times* instilled in the park the same utopian vision that Downing had when he first proposed it. The paper saw it not just as a place of recreation but as a necessity to the city's environment. "The Central Park, it is evident," wrote the *Times*, "is to be by far the most attractive feature of New-York. No city in the world will possess a Park superior to it in many respects. It will effect a marked change in the habits of our people,--bringing out every pleasant day hundreds and thousands of carriages, and creating a kind of delightful recreation which thus far has no existence in this City . . .

⁶⁰ The *New York Times*, "Central Park Misgivings," April 21, 1857, 4.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

The Park will be crowded with citizens and with strangers, and nothing should be left undone to improve all the natural advantages which the ground affords."⁶²

The paper expressed exasperation at the state legislature when charges against the park's management placed the park's completion in jeopardy. "We trust," wrote the *Times*, "that we shall not be charged with cherishing an extravagant ideal of the New-York legislator, when we avow the belief that a person who undertakes to interfere with a great public work on the ground that he has in his possession charges against its actual managers, which he does not venture to produce, is absolutely unfit for his place."⁶³ Although the Assembly later eased its hold on the park's progress, the paper saw the earlier attempt as just another sign of New York State corruption. In reference to the park's commissioners, the paper wrote that the "people of New-York, they may be sure, rejoice with them, not only in the escape of a noble enterprise already endeared to the popular heart, from the arena of partisan struggles and personal or political spites, but in the vindication of an important body of public functionaries from the odious imputation of 'malfeasance.' It is a sad sign of the times that this imputation should have been so lightly flung before the Legislature as in this case it was. It illustrates the unhappy familiarity into which we have fallen with all kinds and degrees of official incapacity and dishonesty" ⁶⁴

⁶² The *New York Times*, "Northern Boundary of the Central Park," January 14, 1858, 4.

⁶³ The *New York Times*, "The Central Park in the Assembly," March 5, 1860, 4.

⁶⁴ The *New York Times*, "The Central Park," March 19, 1860, 4.

Despite any politics that aimed at impeding the park's creation, the *Times* was not so disheartened as not to revel in the park's charms. In fact many articles appeared that seemed to serve no other purpose than to exult its attractions and document a reporter's experience in it. "The people of New York," stated one article, "are gradually awakening to a sense of the really priceless possession which the Central Park bids fair to be to them and to 'their heirs forever.' Not a mere common, or play-ground, or lounging-place in preparing for us in this vast and beautiful public work, but a majestic breathing-place for the life of a great city, and an imperial domain of beauty, worthy the metropolis of the great Republic."⁶⁵ Another article simply recorded what the writer observed while in the park. "All sorts and kinds of people go there, the good and the bad, the handsome and the ugly, the simple and the wise--some seeking pleasure, others relief from trouble, some desiring rest, and others a change from the wearing labor of the day. There are many romantic incidents and many laughable scenes occurring daily, and one cannot be in the grounds an hour at a time without meeting queer people, noticing strange doings, and being impressed with the fact that this is a curious world, and that the people in are the curesest [*sic*] part of it."⁶⁶ The draw of the park was acute, and one that has never since lessened.

A primary activity of leisure that expanded its role in the 1850s was New York's now famous theater and music scene. Theatrical and musical performances became an increasingly popular social activity for the city's upper classes throughout the decade.

⁶⁵ The *New York Times*, "The Central Park," September 3, 1859, 4.

⁶⁶ The *New York Times*, "A Day in Central Park: The Place, its Attractions and its Visitors," August 16, 1860, 5.

George Templeton Strong mentions in his diary, for instance, attending eight theatrical or musical events in 1857, then twenty in each 1858 and 1859, and thirty in 1860.⁶⁷

However, the performing arts were not always held in such high esteem. Colonial Americans did not view the theater as respectable fare, and some, such as influential Calvinist John Witherspoon, “famously denounced the theater as an aspect of that worldly gentility and emotional indulgence which a well-disciplined Christian should avoid. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, however, many theater owners undertook to free dramatic production from their traditional stigma and to broaden their audiences. They presented plays with patriotic and moral themes as well as entertaining ones.”⁶⁸

The plays of William Shakespeare were some that successfully straddled the line between morality and entertainment. “Already revered as cultural icons, the Bard’s plays could be defended by theatrical producers not only as rattling good stories but also as part of a spectators program of self-improvement.”⁶⁹ Little by little, the theater gained acceptance by the “respectable” classes of New York. However, this transition was not a smooth one, and was not without opposition. “The struggle to legitimate the theater and redeem it from opprobrium provoked conflict between the upper and middle classes on the one hand, with their aspirations to polite culture, and the urban working class, which liked the traditional theater just as it was. Working-class patrons

⁶⁷ Strong, vol. II, 316-483.

⁶⁸ Howe, 636.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 637.

of the old-style, nonrespectable venues in New York, like the Park Theater, resented the elegant new Astor Place Opera House, with its rules against prostitutes and its dress code appealing to the affluent."⁷⁰ The Astor House riots (which have been previously mentioned) were the result of this tension, and saw the loss of several dozen lives.

These conflicts were not enough to deter the upper classes from staking their claim in the theatrical and, increasingly, musical world. "Classical music ('art music' as it is sometimes called) came slowly to the United States, since in the beginning the churches did not foster it, and no aristocracy existed to patronize it."⁷¹ Musical education began to develop, which, just as theater, was used for personal enhancement. "The spread of piano-playing as a form of self-improvement greatly broadened interest in classical music, and this in turn eventually stimulated a desire to hear the best music performed by the best artists. The oldest symphony orchestra in the United States still in continuous existence, the New York Philharmonic, was founded in 1842 The increasing ease and frequency of transatlantic crossings put Americans in touch with European music and the musical criticism of the Romantic movement."⁷²

The creation of New York City's Academy of Music in 1854 was the product of this increased interest. However, it was not simply in pursuit of the arts. "The opera house was the one institution that the fashionable world was prepared to support at whatever cost. It was less a place to see and hear than a place to make visible one's

⁷⁰ Ibid., 638.

⁷¹ Ibid., 642.

⁷² Ibid., 643.

bank account and social standing."⁷³ Much in the same vein of sporting the latest fashions and strolling through Central Park, attending the opera or symphony was a way of flaunting one's financial success and social status. "The nineteenth-century opera house was developing into an unapologetic shrine of and for the elite of the city, and as such it was coming in for a fair share of journalistic and public abuse. The Astor Place Opera House was abandoned because it could never rid itself of the taint of the 1849 riots. While money was plentiful in the booming years of the early 1850s, wealthy New Yorkers could afford to replace it with another monument to opera--and themselves."⁷⁴ Completed in 1854, the new Academy building was this monument.

Upon its opening in October, the *New York Times* initially viewed the new Academy as just another example of the city's outlandish extravagance. "There is too much ornamentation about the house; too much modeling, and too little color. It writhes in the eye, and looks cold and cheerless, quite beyond the salvation of gas-burners. The quality of the modeling is excellent; the quantity oppressive."⁷⁵ The paper refers to the architecture as "tortuous," the seats "uncomfortable," and the pillars "objectionable." One of the few positive attributes of the house was the sound. "In an acoustical point of view," continued the *Times*, "the New Academy of Music is a triumph. From all parts of the house, every sound may be caught distinctly. We could

⁷³ Mary C. Henderson, *The City and the Theatre: New York Playhouses from Bowling Green to Times Square* (Clifton, New Jersey: James T. White & Company, 1973), 112.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁷⁵ The *New York Times*, "Musical: Opening of the Academy of Music," October 3, 1854, 4.

hear as well from the back seats of the Amphitheatre as from the parquette. In every other respect the Academy is a decided failure."⁷⁶

Yet despite that harsh first review, it was not long before the *Times* jumped on the bandwagon and showered the Academy with praise. However this praise was not necessarily lauded on the merits of music or the quality of performers, but on the quality of the audience and the superiority of the building. "A crowded and fashionable audience," began the paper's article, "attended the first performance of 'Semiramide' last evening. Numerically it must have been equal to the 'Sonnambala' [sic] night, perhaps four thousand persons being present. In every respect the house presented a handsomer appearance than on any former occasion."⁷⁷ The *Times* also could not resist a bit of bragging on the obvious supremacy that New York had achieved over its rivals across the Atlantic. "In appearance and beauty," the paper boasted,

we are assured that [the Academy] is not transcended by any Theatre or Opera-house in Europe--that we have one department of display not equaled by them; for there the galleries are comparatively shallow, and the tenants of the boxes are concealed--while here every individual lends his presence to the scene, and all the charm of dress and beauty enhances the general effect. This Opera-house, with its beautiful and hanging dome, its fresh, artistic and charming scenery, its ample auditorium, and a New York audience, is a fairy scene that well repays a visit even though the best voices of the world were not upon the stage.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ The *New York Times*, "Musical," October 31, 1854, 4.

⁷⁸ The *New York Times*, "The Musical Celebrities," November 17, 1854, 4.

Even in the discussion of the building's merits, the emphasis is put on the how well it shows off the attending audience.

The prominence attained by the theater and musical performances in the 1850s was never lost. Theater remained popular even through the trials of the Civil War--made no clearer than in the fact that a theater was the site of Abraham Lincoln's assassination. "When the Academy burned down in 1866, it was immediately rebuilt and the number of its boxes was increased to accommodate the expanded rolls of society."⁷⁹ That role has not lessened even in present day, and New York City remains the theater capital of America and one of the most preeminent in the world.

New York's "Gilded Age," as it is called, did not truly begin until the 1870s, however few would argue that the city in the 1850s was any less opulent and extravagant than that term implies. Good fortune and determination in the development of the port allowed the city to reap the benefits of a well-established economy, and the New Yorkers had no problem displaying their good fortune in the form of both goods and leisure. In discussion of Central Park, the *Times* wrote that "[t]here is no reason why one hundred, or even fifty years hence, people should not seek New-York to enjoy themselves, just as they now seek it to make money in."⁸⁰ It would seem, in hindsight, that New Yorkers did not wait for those years to pass before enjoying themselves.

⁷⁹ Henderson, 113.

⁸⁰ The *New York Times*, "Central Park Misgivings," April 21, 1857, 4.

III. THE POLITICAL MACHINE: THE CITY'S CONFLICTS

CORRUPTION

On February 14, 1855, George Templeton Strong wrote in his diary that “Mayor Wood continues our Civic Hero--inquiring, reforming, redressing, laboring hard with ample result of good. If he goes on this way to the end of his term, he will be a public benefactor, recognized as such and honored with statues.”¹ Yet by June 24, 1857, Strong now referred to Wood as “that King of scoundrels” and “the arch-knave of our civic structure!”² What occurred in those two years to so vastly alter Strong’s opinion? Fernando Wood’s fall from public favor offers an exemplary illustration of the corruption and fraudulence that plagued the city of New York for decades of the nineteenth century. This corruption was rampant within the city’s government in the 1850s and touched off a reform movement that altered the city’s municipal landscape forever.

New York’s corruption is often associated with Tammany Hall.³ The Tammany Society, which began as a nonpolitical fraternal order in May of 1789, lost its

¹ Strong, George Templeton. *The Diary of George Templeton Strong*. Vol. II, ed. by Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas (New York: Macmillan Company, 1952; repr. New York: Octagon Books, 1974), 211.

² *Ibid.*, 345.

³ The quintessential account of Tammany corruption is William L. Riordon’s *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics, Delivered by Ex-Senator George Washington Plunkitt, the Tammany Philosopher, from his Rostrum--The New York City County Courthouse Bootblack Stand* (New York: Signet Classics, 1995).

momentum as republican patriotism quietly died in the early nineteenth century. Yet, as the national order dissipated, the New York chapter thrived, gaining a footing in opposition to the DeWitt Clinton Republicans who then dominated New York City.⁴ Their headquarters was commonly known as Tammany Hall. “Nineteenth-century American urbanism refashioned the pattern of national growth, and Tammany Hall’s evolution as a political machine was part of this process.”⁵ When New York’s new state constitution granted suffrage to nearly every white man in 1822, Tammany was transformed into a new style political environment where candidates ran for office, sought wide-ranging support of the masses and manipulated the electorate by evoking popular symbols and themes. Tammany had to decide whether to gear its society towards the new aristocracy with their wealth, political connections and powerful (but limited) numbers, or to side with the lower classes--free laborers, apprentices, and immigrants--who were then filing into the city in droves. The Hall chose the more populous group, then giving it the ability to dominate the local urban scene for nearly a century. One of the most notorious politicians to come out of the Hall was Fernando Wood.⁶

Despite Wood’s concerted efforts to paint himself as a member of one of

⁴ DeWitt Clinton was New York politician who ran against, and lost to, James Madison in the 1812 presidential election. He was however elected governor of New York in a special election (following Governor Tompkins resignation to become Vice President) and served that office until the end of 1822. He was re-elected governor in 1824 and served until his death in 1828. For more information on the life of Clinton, see Evan Cornog’s *The Birth of Empire: DeWitt Clinton and the American Experience, 1769-1828* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁵ Jerome Mushkat, *Tammany: The Evolution of a Political Machine, 1789-1865* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1971), 2.

⁶ Mushkat, *Tammany: The Evolution of a Political Machine, 1789-1865*, 1-5.

America's distinguished families, his beginnings were nothing if not ordinary.⁷ Born in 1812, he was the third son of Rebecca Lehmann, the daughter of modest German immigrants, and Benjamin, a small-time speculator who suffered bankruptcy and a nervous breakdown following the War of 1812 and eventually deserted his family. By age thirteen Wood entered the workforce out of economic necessity, drifting through various jobs ranging from actor to tobacco trader, eventually opening a small grocery and grog shop with his new young wife Anna.⁸ His fortunes took an upswing when he became friends with fellow businessman and minor Tammany politician Francis A. Secor and Joseph A. Scoville, a young merchant with good connections. "In 1836, they lifted him from obscurity by initiating him into the exclusive Tammany Society. The society pictured itself purely as a social and fraternal order with an incidental political association. Yet becoming a brother was highly prized among Democrats because it represented the first rung on the political ladder. While not every "brave" was a politician, the party's entire hierarchy came from its ranks."⁹

⁷ Jerome Mushkat, *Fernando Wood: A Political Biography* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1990), 1. A biography of Wood (*Biography of Hon. Fernando Wood, Mayor of the City of New York*) by Donald MacLeod appeared on the shelves of New York bookstores in 1856 during Wood's first term that painted him as the "Model Mayor." However, MacLeod was hardly objective, and had been subsidized by Wood himself to write the book. Wood, it is also believed, had probably ghost-written substantial sections.

⁸ While Wood's early years as a grocer were not particularly well-documented, Joseph A. Secor later accused Wood of unethical practices, claiming he swindled illiterate longshoremen by overcharging for their drinks and billing them for unpurchased drinks. There is little evidence to support these claims, but they were welcomed by Wood's enemies.

⁹ Mushkat, *Fernando Wood: A Political Biography*, 7. As the name Tammany came from Tamanend, a Native American leader of the Lenape tribe, members of the society were sometimes referred to as "braves."

Wood eagerly took to his new role. He chaired the first anti-Bank Democratic rally following the economic crisis of 1837 and authored motions and resolves of the Young Men's Committee to hold banks accountable for the recession.¹⁰ He was soon elected secretary of Young Men's in 1837 and their chairman in 1839, placed on the Committee of Safety (which coordinated protests against a Whig-sponsored voter registration law) in 1840, and was sent to the Democratic national convention in Baltimore as a Van Buren delegate. Yet Wood's accolades were not coming from all sides. Some within the party, such as future mayor William F. Havenmeyer, described him as "without character or consequence, yet shrewd & subtle, a cunning politician."¹¹ His dedication to political causes also cost him in his personal life. His wife Anna, feeling neglected by her husband, was caught committing individual adulterous affairs with several of Wood's friends. The marriage was dissolved in July 1839, and Wood, clearly embarrassed by the incident, never mentioned his first wife or their marriage again.¹²

Wood obtained his first elected post in 1840, when he ran for a Congressional seat, but it did not come without a fight. In an elaborate smear campaign, Charles King, editor of the Whig *New York American*, revealed that Wood had ignored a \$1,750.62 banking error in his favor, then refused to pay the bank back once the error was

¹⁰ Ibid., 8. The Young Men's Committee (technically titled the Young Men's Democratic-Republican General Committee) was the group that saw to the grooming of future Tammany leaders, and entrance was only allotted to those loyal to Tammany views.

¹¹ Mushkat, *Fernando Wood: A Political Biography*, 11.

¹² Ibid., 11-12. While it is not actually known for certain what became of Anna W. Wood, many of Wood's political enemies disseminated the claim that she, having been forbid by their divorce decree to ever marry again, became an alcoholic prostitute.

discovered. When the bank demanded an inspection of Wood's books, Wood rather suspiciously informed its officers that a recent fire had destroyed all his documents. Wood then declared he was innocent of the charge and that it was merely an attempt by the Whigs to discredit him. He apparently passed the test of public opinion, and won his seat by 886 votes. Yet the bank scandal would continue to haunt him for the rest of his public life. He was assumed guilty by many of his constituents, who found the idea that Wood could be oblivious to such a bank error improbable. This issue of Wood's character stirred many passionate emotions surrounding Wood that were just as often bad as good. "The resultant dichotomy left a complex man torn in two, a principled politician and a cheap trickster, a man of great potential and equally great self-devouring habits."¹³

Life outside of politics was also flourishing for Wood. In July 1841, he married for a second time, oddly again to a woman named Anna, the daughter of a Common Pleas Judge father and a mother of direct descent to William Penn. This Anna brought with her not only a modest inheritance, but the political connections of her well-respected father. Financially, Wood also saw his prospects booming. His speculative investments grew along with New York's population; one hundred and fifty acres he had purchased for four-thousand dollars in 1848 had returned his investment within the year, and by 1868 was worth \$650,000. Leveraging these properties allowed Wood to obtain property in San Francisco, Brooklyn and Chicago (even holding the mortgage on the home of Stephen A. Douglas there), and to invest in a variety of businesses,

¹³ Ibid., 15.

including banking, insurance companies, and railroads.¹⁴ By the end of the 1850s, Wood was a millionaire, and as William Tweed later said “I never yet went to get a corner lot that I didn’t find Wood had got in ahead of me.”¹⁵

The *New York Times* was hardly a supporter of Wood, and seemed to follow Strong’s discourse from civic hero to scoundrel. It should be noted, however, that the *Times* was by no means presenting an unbiased view of the mayor. In 1852, *Times* editor Henry Raymond, along with several other likeminded prominent citizens, formed the City Reform League.¹⁶ The league was “determined to recapture the municipal ship from the pirates who had boarded and seized it...,” and set out on a mission of city reform. For example, in June of 1853, it successfully prevailed upon the legislature to pass a drastic reduction in aldermanic powers. The Board of Assistant Alderman was dissolved in favor of a sixty-man Board of Councilman that was annually elected and was supposedly large enough to avoid bribery. This body was given total charge of legislation expenditures and was required to award municipal contracts to the lowest bidder. Control of the police force was also shifted to a Board of Commissioners

¹⁴ Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace. *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 831.

¹⁵ Mushkat, *Fernando Wood: A Political Biography*, 23. William Tweed (1823-1878), better known as Boss Tweed, was a powerful Tammany politician, elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1852, the New York City Board of Advisors in 1856, the New York State Senate in 1867, and was director of the Erie Railroad. He was eventually tried and convicted of stealing between forty and two hundred million dollars from New York City taxpayers by creating fake invoices for work that was never done. While out on bail Tweed fled to Cuba and then Spain before being captured and returned to a New York City jail, where he died less than two years later.

¹⁶ Burrows, 830. The other citizens who formed the group with Raymond included John Harper, ironmonger William Dodge, shipbuilder William Webb, rentier Peter Stuyvesant, president of the Merchants’ Exchange Simeon Baldwin, banker Moses Taylor, and several other merchants including Stephen Whitney, William Aspinwall, and Henry Grinnell.

(including the mayor, recorder, and city judges), who ordered the police into blue uniforms and granted them tenure positions (which resulted in a forty percent increase in arrests in 1854). The mayor's powers were also strengthened, as his veto now required a two-thirds majority in both legislative chambers (the Commissioners and the Councilmen) to be overridden. Despite their success, the group was short lived. In 1854, an influential segment decided to back Tammany's new candidate for mayor, Fernando Wood. Unable to rally unanimous support, the group split; Raymond, it would seem, was on the anti-Wood side.

The *Times'* frustration with Wood began even before his successful mayoral election. In the weeks leading up to that contest, the paper implored the public to band together to defeat Wood. "Honest intelligent men almost without an exception," declared the *Times*, "agree that the election of Fernando Wood, as Mayor, would be a great misfortune to this City. Both in character and antecedents, he is the very embodiment of the corrupt interests and corrupt systems which have in former times swayed our municipal affairs with such pernicious and disgraceful effect."¹⁷ His election was eminent, they believed, only because Wood's opposition could not, or would not, unite themselves. The paper implored Wood's three opposition candidates to realize this fact, and that two of them drop out of the race accordingly. A Mr. James W. Baker, the *Times* decided, was much more suitable candidate, as he was a "faithful administrator of the laws," whereas Wood was "just his opposite."¹⁸ The *Times* recalled

¹⁷ The *New York Times*, "The Mayoralty," November 4, 1854, 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

the business indiscretions of Wood's past as evidence of his unfitness. "No such man ought to be trusted in any office," it continued, "and it would be a disgrace to the City to elect him Mayor."¹⁹

Yet elected he was, although not through entirely honest means. Wood's strongest support came from the working-class wards, such as the Irish Sixth, where he managed to garner four thousand more votes than there were voters. Supporters seemed to have forgiven Wood's past injudiciousness and the threat of more in the future in favor of the hope he gave to reform. "Wood's mayoralty becomes understandable only within the context of extraordinary economic progress and severe human crisis. New York was ready for a reform-minded, innovative leader, a man with an overarching and compelling vision of a better society, a city builder, a person with the capacity to make the government respond to needs which other mayors had not acknowledged let alone addressed. It was here that Fernando Wood established himself as a major figure in the life of his city and, ultimately, his nation."²⁰ He wasted no time in instituting the reforms he envisioned, either. Taking office on New Year's Day in 1855, Wood instantly nominated four clerks and, without waiting for approval from the Board of Alderman as the law prescribed, swore them in that very morning. The *Times* noted this in an article, but promised to forgive Wood this early violation if he kept his promises of reform, but admitted it was left "a little wondering, perhaps,

¹⁹ The *New York Times*, "The Mayoralty," November 7, 1854, 4.

²⁰ Mushkat, *Fernando Wood: A Political Biography*, 38.

and honestly anxious to know what will come of such radical reforms as are promised, and how this beginning will end.”²¹

The *Times*, however, was pleasantly surprised by the new mayor’s actions in coming weeks. Before the end of his first month in office, the paper was singing Wood’s praises to its readers. When Wood instigated a new temperance law banning the sale of liquors on Sundays, the *Times* reported on the act with eagerness. “It is gratifying,” said a *Times* article, “after the careless administration of the City Government in times past, to see that there is now a disposition to turn over a new leaf.”²² The paper noticed a positive change in city upon the implementation of the law. “That this state of affairs is susceptible to improvement,” wrote the *Times* in reference to Sunday’s general rowdiness, “is sufficiently indicated by the marked change that has taken place since the present Mayor has undertaken to lay the axe at the root of the evil.”²³ Wood did not stop at temperance, and vowed to reform the city through a myriad of other improvements. He declared he would commence a crusade on prostitution, called for clean streets and effective building codes, a new city hall and stone municipal docks, efficient sanitary policies and market inspectors, expanded water systems and uptown steam railroads, and the creation of a full-sized Central Park, a great university and a free academy for young women. These initiatives would constitute a revitalization of New York City that would, he said, make New Yorkers

²¹ The *New York Times*, “The City’s Chief--His Promises,” January 3, 1855, 4.

²² The *New York Times*, “Sunday Liquor,” January 19, 1855, 4.

²³ *Ibid.*

proud of their “citizenship in this metropolis” and allow them to “say with Paul or Tarsus, ‘I am a citizen of no mean city.’”²⁴

Yet for all the praise being poured upon Wood, criticism was never far behind. In September 1855, the mayor had several aldermen indicted for “malfeasance” in office. “However painful and humiliating it is to me to make this announcement,” stated Wood, “and for you to receive it, still we owe a duty to the public from which we must not shrink, affect whom it may.”²⁵ Despite this apparent show of responsibility, those aldermen who were removed from their positions saw their fate as nothing more than Wood stacking the government with his own associates and affiliates. In a letter to the *Times*, dismissed Alderman A.J. Williamson noted that those reformers who got Wood elected “are now his most earnest and active supporters. They stand ready to aid him in destroying any and every man who dares to expose his hypocrisy and fraud.”²⁶ Williamson was convinced that his dismissal had nothing to do with his performance as a government official but was rather a reflection of his reluctance to be connected with a man like Wood. “Those who are willing,” continued Williamson, “to be associated with a man who, notoriously had been guilty of some of the basest acts in the calendar of crime, simply because he happens to be the Mayor of the City of New York, will of

²⁴ Burrows, 832.

²⁵ The *New York Times*, “Municipal,” September 25, 1855, 1.

²⁶ The *New York Times*, “The Mayor and the Common Council,” October 8, 1855, 1.

course consult their own inclinations. For my part, I prefer to mingle with less distinguished characters."²⁷

Soon the circle of those doubting Wood's integrity began to grow. While most citizens supported the creation of Central Park, many were suspicious when Wood took control of the project in 1856. "It was noted that Wood owned properties adjacent to the park, and such an enterprise left in his hands seemed to his enemies a classic example of graft and corruption masquerading as a desirable public improvement."²⁸ Another of Wood's initiatives was to deny policeman the opportunity to run for office, which the *Times* saw as "more curious than important."²⁹ The order would threaten the life of the department, as "the Police were quite lively as politicians. Henceforth they must 'chair' no meetings, distribute no tickets, know no Whig, no Demacrat [*sic*], no [Alderman Anson] Herrick, no Wood, no nothing but the policemen's duty."³⁰ Wood's moves to assert nonpartisan control over New York City's police force alarmed those who denounced Wood's ambition for "one-man rule."³¹ The police would soon become Wood's most contentious reform, and would bring about his downfall.

As corruption still permeated the city, die-hard reformists took their battle to the state government in Albany. The countryside had always been stronger than the city in

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Eric Homberger, *Scenes From the Life of a City: Corruption and Conscience in Old New York* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 157.

²⁹ *The New York Times*, "Policemen Can't be Politicians--Mayor Wood's Order," November 1, 1855, 8.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Homberger, 157.

temperance and nativism, and animosity towards New York City grew along with the metropolis. Its gigantic corporations, burgeoning wealthy class, the barbarism of the poor and the power-hungry demagogues were all a threat to Christian and republican America. "Saving the republic required that the metropolis be brought under the control of the good people of the state."³² The vehicle for this change was the newly-formed Republican Party, which came together in New York in 1855 with a mix of Seward Whigs, Free Soil Democrats, and disaffected Know-Nothings. The 1856 elections saw New York elect a Republican governor, John Alsop King, and a Republican majority to the Assembly. The Republicans, once in office, soon began a series of reforms that challenged New York City's claims of special status as a municipal corporation with independent powers as derived from colonial-era charters. It was held that city property was state property, to be held in trust for the public. The state legislature could interfere with any city matters, and New York City's government, like any other city in the state, existed only because the state granted it power.³³

The legislature began changing New York City's charter without submitting it to the people for approval. The Common Council was stripped of financial power, with authority to administer real estate, audit accounts, oversee disbursements and collect taxes being transferred to the state's Republican comptroller. State agencies were created to take power away from municipal representatives--who were by this time

³² Burrows, 835.

³³ Ibid., 835-836.

represented by Wood's immigrant masses--and given to the state, which now controlled over three-fourths of New York City's budget. Wood himself was the target of this new legislation and was required to stand for reelection in December of 1857, effectively cutting the length of his 2-year term from his 1856 reelection in half. Republicans were able to achieve such reforms because Democrats, split between those who supported Wood and those who feared his growing power, were unable to make a unified stance, and many Tammanyites, who considered Wood to be a greater threat than Republicans within the city.

Aware that if enforcement of these reforms was left to New York City's current municipal police force their efforts would be in vain, the state also passed the Metropolitan Police Act on April 16, 1857. The act provided for a new police force that would shift control from the mayor to a state-appointed Metropolitan Police Commission and dissolved the requirement that policemen serve in the wards where they lived. The new force was also given control over, among other things, the election machinery of New York and Brooklyn. Reaction was swift, and many New Yorkers cried out in vain that their rights were being taken away and that the city was running just fine without state interference. Wood denounced the legislation "as disgraceful to the parties responsible as they are repugnant to the constitution and to our dearest rights and liberties."³⁴ The *Times*, while initially shocked by the actions in Albany, eventually took the middle road in not endorsing either side of the issue. "We suppose there are very few people in the State of New-York," wrote the *Times*, "or any other

³⁴ The *New York Times*, "City Affairs: Important Document," May 5, 1857, 2.

State, who have any doubt about the way in which the controversy pending between the Mayor and the New Police Commissioners will end. If the Court of Appeals decided against him he will be forced to submit; if it decide for him his adversaries will submit; in any case the law will triumph, and the triumph of the law over individual wants and wishes is the thing which we have all most at heart."³⁵ Curiously, this conflict would be referred to by both the *Times* and George Templeton Strong as "the Civil War."³⁶

The Mayor, it seems, was not so quick to submit. Wood convinced the Common Council to establish a separate police force, the Municipal Police, who were comprised of veteran officers and were directly under mayoral control. Officers chose sides, and in the end Wood's Municipal Police retained roughly eight hundred policemen and fifteen captains. Three hundred policemen and seven captains joined the Metropolitan Police. This division of authority contributed to anarchy. Criminals would be arrested by one force and then freed by the other, while rival policemen physically fought each other for control of station houses. When Metropolitan Police captain George W. Walling attempted to serve Mayor Wood with a warrant for his arrest for criminal contempt, he was thrown out of city hall by the rival police force. Upon returning with a mass of Metropolitans, Walling was met with an even greater crowd of Municipals.³⁷

³⁵ The *New York Times*, "The Mayor versus The State," June 1, 1857, 4.

³⁶ The *New York Times*, "The Civil War," June 18, 1857, 1; Strong, 342.

³⁷ Burrows, 838-839.

It was not long before violence ensued between the police factions. "Clubs were drawn and freely used," described the *Times*. "Many of the 'roughs' drew from beneath their coats huge sticks and various other weapons and going in the fight charged upon the Metropolitan men, who fought with great determination. Many on both sides were felled to the ground, and blood sprited [sic] high from the wounds of the combatants.... The scene was a terrible one; blows upon naked heads fell thick and fast, and men rolled helpless down the steps, to be leaned upon and beaten till life seemed extinct."³⁸ The Metropolitans carried the day in the end, but only due to the help of the New York Militia's Seventh Regiment, which came to their rescue. Wood was served his warrant, and the Court of Appeals ruled in favor of the state on July 2nd.³⁹ The day after the ruling, Wood "surrendered" (as the *Times* put it) and disbanded the Municipal Police force.⁴⁰ Yet this was not the end of the fighting, which would in fact get much worse.

New York City's Fourth of July celebrations, which had always been met with some rowdiness, took a more violent turn in 1857 in light of the police wars. The Metropolitan Police were now solely responsible for the control of the holiday's parades, rallies, heavy drinking and street brawls, and hardly had the experience to oversee such an event. Most of the police force's veterans had joined the Municipal Police and were now refused positions among the Metropolitan, leaving no more than a

³⁸ The *New York Times*, "Rioting and Bloodshed," June 17, 1857, 1.

³⁹ The *New York Times*, "The Recent Crimes of Fernando Wood and their Penalties," June 19, 1857, 4. Wood was being served with a warrant for criminal contempt. He would in the following days be served with a warrant for riotous assault, and ten separate warrants for suits brought against him by policemen injured in the riots.

⁴⁰ The *New York Times*, "Mayor Wood Surrenders," July 4, 1857.

hundred policemen with even a month's worth of experience. When a small group of Metropolitans found themselves under attack from a small group of young men and boys, they broke ranks, and sought shelter in a nearby saloon. The saloon was headquarters of the Bowery Boys, a nativist gang, who fought off the assailants. Yet soon the Dead Rabbits, a competing Irish gang of ardent Wood supporters, opened up on another small band of Metropolitans. Again, the Bowery Boys came to the police's rescue, and soon the gangs and their respective supporters had escalated the brawl into a full-on riot. Makeshift barricades of carts, barrels and lumber were erected, brickbats flew, and soon gunshots rang out. "Men, women, and children came pouring down in throngs through Baxter and Leonard-street out of range of the bullets, and maimed and bleeding men and boys were carried every moment by in the arms of their friends, or on carts to the hospital or their homes."⁴¹ Twelve died either at the scene or shortly after, and another thirty-seven were injured. The riot raged for hours and only ended due to the exhaustion of the participants. It was considered the worst riot since that of Astor Place in 1849.⁴²

Wood lost all support of the *Times* following the riots, for which responsibility was put squarely on his shoulders. "The cause of this disgraceful row must be laid

⁴¹ The *New York Times*, "Rioting and Bloodshed," July 6, 1857, 1.

⁴² Burrows 761-764. The Astor Place riot began with an ill-received theater performance of British actor William Charles McCready in *Macbeth*. McCready was a vocal supporter of "refining" the theater, making acting a respectable profession and the theater a place for the upper-crust of society who would appreciate his art. Foreign-born New Yorkers took great offense to this and pelted McCready with potatoes, apples, lemons and copper coins during his performance. McCready's next performance drew a crowd of protest ten-thousand strong, who threw stones through the windows of Astor Theater and rammed the doors. Police were called to put down the riot, opened fire on the crowd, and in the end twenty-two were killed, 150 more wounded, and 117 arrested.

directly at the door of the Mayor, whose disorganizing and reckless opposition to the laws of the State, cannot but have had its effect upon the minds of the baser part of our population; and the disbanding of the old Police, on the eve of the Fourth, was, in itself, sufficient to incite a mob."⁴³ It was now clear to *Times* readers that Fernando Wood cared more for his own power than for their safety and welfare. The *Times* even insinuated that the riots were of the Mayor's design, as he would have known the impending result of his actions. "If Mayor Wood can look at this picture with complacency, charging none of the blood and suffering of the 4th and 5th to his own account, his conscience is more conveniently seared than we are prepared to believe. No man was more competent than the Mayor to foresee these sad results of his misguided course."⁴⁴

A later *Times* article, ominously titled "The Suicide of Mr. Fernando Wood," sarcastically commended the mayor for revealing his true nature. "For our part, we can only thank Mr. Wood for unmasking himself. We have always expressed our opinions freely on his pretend devotion to popular interests and the municipal franchise. But he himself has just done more than we have ever been able to say to exhibit in his true colors to the people."⁴⁵ More than anything, New Yorkers seemed to be most upset by their disappointed hopes. The successes of the beginning of his first mayoral term demonstrated Wood's ability to govern justly and properly, if he so chose. That which

⁴³ The *New York Times*, "Rows on the Fourth," July 6, 1857, 4.

⁴⁴ The *New York Times*, "Who is Responsible?" July 11, 1857, 4.

⁴⁵ The *New York Times*, "The Suicide of Mr. Fernando Wood," November 9, 1857, 2.

could have been was more of the loss than what was. "Wood," wrote George Templeton Strong, "is a man of great energy, ambition, and perseverance, and most prolific in resource--pity he's a scoundrel."⁴⁶

IMMIGRATION, NATIVISM, & the KNOW-NOTHINGS

In Emma Lazarus's poem "The New Colossus," inscribed on the of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor, the poet writes "Give me your tired, your poor/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free/The wretched refuse of your teeming shore./Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,/I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"⁴⁷ Those poor, homeless huddled masses were exactly what New York got during the middle of the nineteenth century. The 1840s and 1850s saw the United States absorb more immigrants than any other time in its history, and New York City, the port through which most of them arrived, remained the final destination for many. Yet, despite the Statue of Liberty's hospitable message, the flood of new arrivals was not always given a warm welcome on American shores.

Immigrants to the United States during the 1850s were overwhelmingly of Irish or German origin, each fleeing the turmoil of their respective homelands. The industrial revolution was hitting Germany particularly hard and sent many adrift across Western Europe and eventually to America. The linen districts of Hanover and

⁴⁶ Strong, vol. II, 350.

⁴⁷ Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus," in *The Poetry of American Women from 1632 to 1945* by Emily Stipes Watts (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1977).

the western provinces could not compete with machine-spun yarns from England, and weavers eventually sold their lands out of necessity and used the proceeds to emigrate.⁴⁸ Yet Germans did not necessarily congregate in the port cities such as New York. Generally coming to America with more money than their Irish counterparts, German immigrants tended to venture farther inland to new cities such as Milwaukee and Cincinnati.⁴⁹ The Irish faced much harsher conditions on their native soil and came to America in greater numbers and in greater despair. Over-population made land scarce, as the constant subdividing of land among children significantly reduced the size of family farms. By 1841, 563,153 of the 691,114 land holdings consisted of less than fifteen acres, making an agricultural living especially difficult to sustain.⁵⁰ Fathers were forced to institute primogeniture (bestowing the entire inheritance upon the eldest son) rather than dividing the land amongst all their sons, leaving many Irish without any home or prospects.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Robert Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City, 1825-1863* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 3.

⁴⁹ Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 8.

⁵⁰ Ernst, 5.

⁵¹ Anbinder, 5.

Immigration to the United States 1820 to 1860

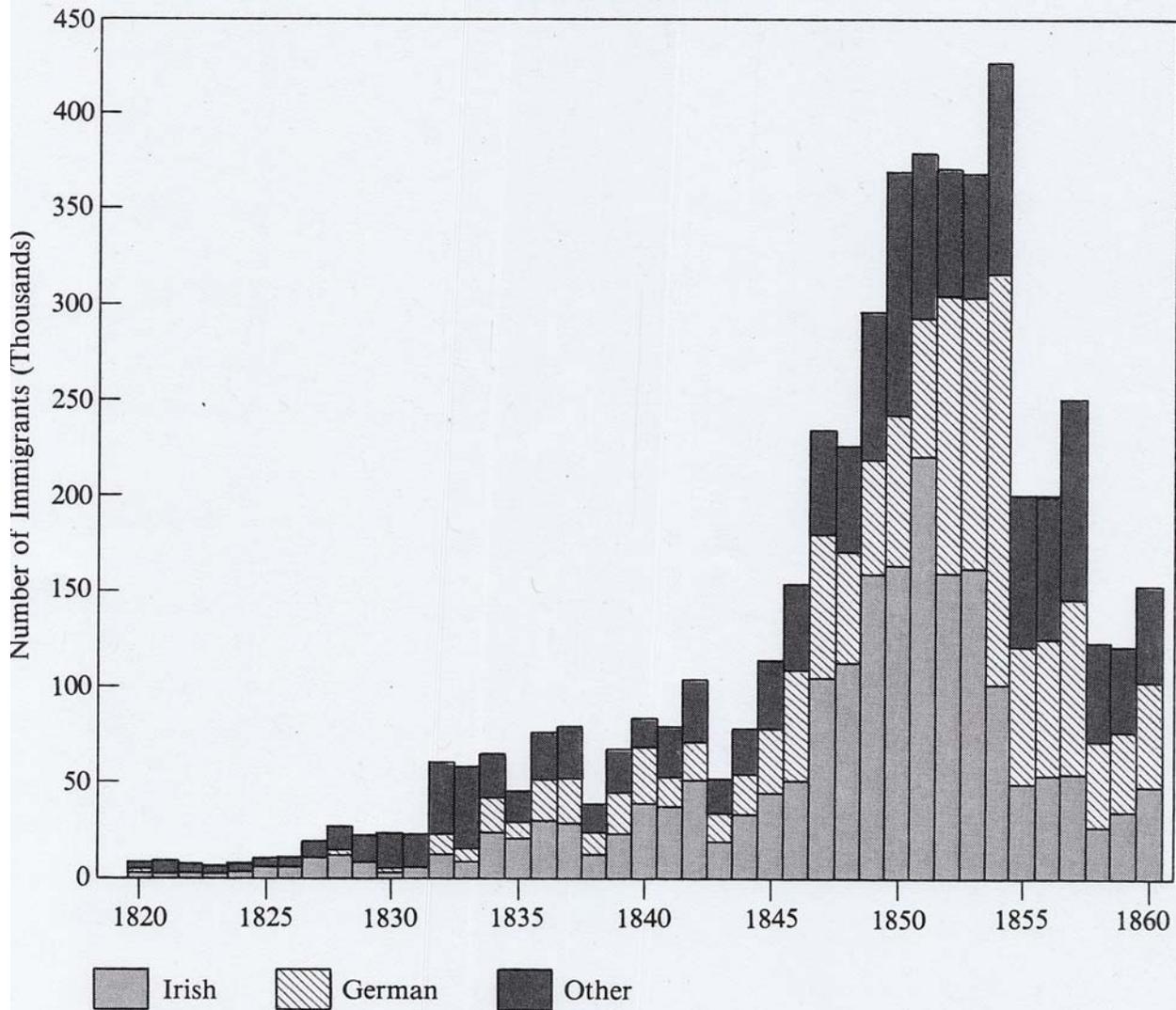


Fig. 2. Immigration to the United States between 1820 and 1860 highlighting Irish and German immigration.⁵²

The foremost reason for Irish immigration, however, was the potato blight that began in 1845. Brought on by a fungus that caused the potato plant to turn black and then crumble to ashes, the blight destroyed thirty to forty percent of that year's potato crop. Family and governmental relief efforts managed to stave off starvation initially,

⁵² Anbinder, 4.

but could not sustain the population for long. The following year the fungus only spread further, obliterating nearly the entire potato crop. The blight seemed to abate in 1847, allowing for a small harvest. However, since very few farmers were willing to risk planting the ill-fated potato, that harvest brought in only ten percent of the potatoes seen in 1844. Still the small harvest was enough to renew faith in the crop, and farmers again planted them in abundance. Yet the Irish were again disappointed when the fungus persisted, and each year up until the mid-1850s saw potato harvest of less than half their pre-blight level. Because Ireland had already been suffering from widespread poverty, and since many families subsided almost exclusively on potatoes, the consequences of the blight were acute. Of the eight million residents of pre-famine Ireland, it is estimated that between one and 1.5 million died of starvation or starvation-related illnesses. With their families dying around them, and a government with little ability to help, another two million fled the country, and three-fourths of those headed to America.⁵³

The immigrants who came to America following the famine were a different class than those who came before. Only twenty-one percent of the Irish who immigrated in 1820 were unskilled laborers. These earlier immigrants also generally came with more financial security, as only those with substantial money could afford the Atlantic crossing, and tended to be Presbyterians or Anglicans from Northern

⁵³ Ibid., 6.

Ireland.⁵⁴ The Irish immigrants of the 1840s and 1850s were the most destitute group to ever arrive at an American port. Eighty to ninety percent were unskilled laborers, a third spoke nothing but Gaelic, and few had any saving, even though the cost of ship passage has significantly decreased. Also, a full ninety percent were Catholic.⁵⁵ While New York City received the largest number of immigrants, it was not the only American city to see a population influx of foreign-borns. By 1855, the populations of Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee, Buffalo, Cleveland, and Cincinnati had more immigrants than native-borns; Boston, Pittsburgh, Albany, Rochester, and Troy saw immigrants compose a third of their populations; and immigrants made up a sixth of the populations of Philadelphia and Newark. Conversely, relatively few immigrants settled in the southern states, with only Baltimore, New Orleans, St. Louis and Louisville receiving any significant numbers, as immigrants did not want to compete with slave labor for work.⁵⁶ All told, between 1845 and 1854 nearly three million immigrants landed in the United States, more than the previous seventy years combined. The influx as a percentage amounted to 14.5 percent of the 1845 population, an increase that has yet to ever be surpassed in American history.⁵⁷

With this influx of immigrants came a revived backlash of nativist sentiment. New Yorkers especially began to feel threatened by the new competition for already

⁵⁴ For more information on these earlier immigrants see James Webb's *Born Fighting: How the Scots-Irish Shaped America* (New York: Broadway Books, 2004).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 4-7.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

sparse housing and jobs, and blame for these hardships was put primarily on the shoulders of the Irish Catholics. However nativism has its roots much farther back than the 1850s. “The Second Great Awakening,” explains Dale T. Knobel, “left behind it many evangelical Protestants who believed that the future of the nation depended entirely upon the personal salvation of its citizens and who often seemed convinced that the chief impediment to this goal was the Roman Catholic Church.”⁵⁸ The Church, with its perceived demand of subservience to the Papacy, was a threat to the individualism that was the basis of American progress. Human liberty was also believed to be at stake, since Catholicism assigned all powers to the Pope through divine appointment, whereas the principle of freedom was that the power was held by the people. “Believing the American people to be above all else energetic and enterprising, and the American nation to be a place where the ‘bad’ was in the past and ‘what is good is in the future,’ [Nativists] could not help but view the possibility of Catholic domination with deep foreboding.”⁵⁹ Catholics were also accused of being debilitating to the societies they inhabited. The comparisons between the prosperous and enlightened nations of northern Europe were frequently contrasted with declining,

⁵⁸ Dale T. Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), 134. The Second Great Awakening took place roughly from 1790 into the 1840s. For more information on the Great Awakening, see Barry Hankins’s *The Second Great Awakening and the Transcendentalists* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004).

⁵⁹ Stephen E. Maizlish, “The Meaning of Nativism and the Crisis of the Union: The Know-Nothing Movement in the Antebellum North,” in *Essays on American Antebellum Politics, 1840-1860*, ed. by Stephen E. Maizlish and John J. Kushma (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1982), 174.

poor areas of southern Europe and South America. "Societal stagnation and Roman Catholicism appeared to be constant companions."⁶⁰

Catholics, in fact, were the core enemy of the nativist movement, not the Irish. The Irish, because of their numbers, merely became the target by association. "Since Catholicism was labeled a foreign device and European immigrants seemed to be the principal source of American Catholicism's increase, anti-Catholicism and institutional anti-foreignism were closely identified throughout the antebellum period." Knobel stressed this connection in his study of nativist propaganda, as he found nativists quite calculating and particular in their choice of words. "There was nothing incidental about most references to Catholics, immigrants, foreigners, or Irishmen in this literature," he explains. "For that reason, it is significant that specific references to the Irish in nativist rhetoric were not more common. Less than half of the overtly nativist documents sampled for [Knobel's] study yielded any 'unit-perceptions' of the Irish at all. And together, there contained a modest 240 descriptive references. The Irish were not the principal objects of nativist discourse."⁶¹

Throughout the 1820s and 1830s, nativist rhetoric followed along much of the same lines as popular conversation. "The Irish, in nativist parlance as in more popular patterns of language, were stereotypically illiterate and undereducated, degraded and depraved. The words themselves suggested that nativist ideologues shared the prevailing popular wisdom that character came from experience and environment and

⁶⁰ Maizlish, 175.

⁶¹ Knobel, 140.

that the Irish in both respects had been rendered ill-suited for American nationality."⁶² Yet, while the tone of popular conversation moved on to other things, nativist rhetoric stayed behind. By the mid-1840s and 1850s, popular conversation focused first on Irish conduct and physical appearance, while the nativists retained the view that the Irish condition was the result of environment, which was dominated by the Catholic Church. "Allegations about Irish hostility and violence increased sharply in conventional conversation after 1844 and fell off in nativist rhetoric. This kind of inversion was also the case with physical descriptives: markedly up in nonnativist literature, substantially down in nativistic. The mid-antebellum nativist image of the Irish is, perhaps, best described as 'traditional,' for it remained an ethnic portrait that was chiefly a picture of character, not of behavior or appearance."⁶³ By characterizing the "problem" of the Irish as a matter of character, and intrinsic concern, as opposed to behavior, and extrinsic concern, nativists declared that the Irish could not be rehabilitated by simple acts of charity or education and were thus beyond the reform efforts of America.

Organized nativist organizations emerged in the mid-1840s, mostly in the form of social and fraternal associations. Among the first of these were New York City's Order of United Americans and Philadelphia's United Sons of America, both established in 1844. "The secret societies conventionally combined the appeal of a social club and a self-improvement association with the traditional rhetoric of patriotism and anti-Catholicism, but their chief importance rested in their ability to mobilize large

⁶² Ibid., 130.

⁶³ Ibid., 142.

numbers of adherents for political action, and their real growth accompanied the emergence of a nativistic political movement in the 1850s.”⁶⁴ By far the most successful of these organizations was the Order of the Star-Spangled Banner, founded in 1849, reorganized in 1852, officially named the American Party and most commonly known as the “Know-Nothing” party. The moniker, dubbed by the press, reportedly came from the party’s members repeatedly responding to inquiries about their secret association with “I know nothing.” The movement spread quickly. In 1854, the Know-Nothings prepared a national charter, and by 1855 the Order of United Americans claimed countless chapters in sixteen states.⁶⁵

What allowed these secret societies to burst onto the national stage was in large part the collapse of the Whig Party.⁶⁶ The Compromise of 1850 and later the Kansas-Nebraska Act split the party along pro-slavery and anti-slavery lines. The election of Democratic President Pierce in 1852 and the deaths of party leaders Henry Clay and Daniel Webster left the party fractured and weak, and were all but the final nails in the Whig coffin. The party’s dissolution left many votes up for grabs. The other major parties, the Republicans and Democrats, refused to take solid stances on many of the controversial issues of the day, such as temperance, only serving to frustrate much of

⁶⁴ Ibid., 135.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

the electorate who began to feel that the parties were out of touch with the popular will.

As Tyler Anbinder summarizes:

By 1854, then, all the prerequisites for another outburst of American nativism were in place. Immigration had reached an all-time high, and the sheer numbers of newcomers, their religious affiliations, and their lack of skills made swift assimilation impossible. An existing cadre of die-hard nativists, organized in semi-secret fraternal organizations, waited to foment such an outburst The incipient collapse of the Whig party in the North, and anti-party sentiment pervading the country because of issues such as temperance and slavery extension that transcended conventional political divisions, offered nativist organizations the opportunity to steal disenchanted voters from their old parties. This political chaos...paved the way for the rise of the Know Nothing party.⁶⁷

The Know-Nothing platform, as they outlined for the 1856 presidential election, contained much of the same rhetoric seen from nativist organizations over the previous decade. Resolution three of the fifteen-point platform denoted that “*Americans must rule America; and to this end, native-born citizens should be selected for all state, federal, or municipal offices of government employment, in preference to naturalized citizens.*”⁶⁸ The nativist fears of the Roman Catholic Church were seen in resolutions five and ten, which read, respectively: “No persons should be selected for political station (whether of native or foreign birth), who recognizes any alliance or obligation of any description to any foreign prince, potentate or power, who refuses to recognize the federal and state constitution (each within its own sphere), as paramount to all other laws, as rules of particular [political] action;” and “Opposition to any union between Church and State;

⁶⁷ Anbinder, 19.

⁶⁸ Kirk H. Porter and Donald Bruce Johnson, *National Party Platforms, 1840-1960* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1961), 22.

no interference with religious faith or worship, and no test oaths for office, except those indicated in the 5th section of this platform.”⁶⁹

The platform, in resolutions eight and nine, respectively, also called for a revision to the United States’ naturalizations laws to make it more difficult for foreign-born citizens to obtain suffrage. Resolution eight read that: “An enforcement of the principles that no state or territory can admit other than native-born citizens to the right of suffrage, or of holding political office unless such persons shall have been naturalized according to the laws of the United States.”⁷⁰ Nine advanced changing “the laws of naturalization, making a continued residence of twenty-one years, of all not heretofore provided for, an indispensable requisite for citizenship hereafter, and excluding all paupers or persons convicted of crime from landing upon our shores; but no interference with the vested rights of foreigners.”⁷¹ The party was also careful to designate the issues about which they were not concerned, and sought to distance themselves from slavery and other sectional issues. As resolution fourteen read: “Therefore, to remedy existing evils, and prevent the disastrous consequences otherwise resulting therefrom, we would build up the “American Party” upon the principles hereinbefore stated eschewing all sectional questions, and uniting upon those purely national, and admitting into said party all American citizens...who openly avow

⁶⁹ Ibid., 22-23.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 23.

⁷¹ Ibid., 23.

the principles and opinions heretofore expressed, and who will subscribe their names to this platform."⁷²

Nativism was not simply a political theory, however. Some of the most notorious street gangs ran under anti-Irish and anti-Catholic attitudes. The most famous of these is the Bowery Boys, a powerful gang that ruled over the Five Points during most of the 1850s. The Five Points was the intersection of Cross, Anthony, Little Water, Orange and Mulberry streets, which jointed in a triangular area about one acre in extent called Paradise Square.⁷³ While the area was initially a decent place to live, the fact that it had been built on a marsh land soon lead the buildings to crumble and become unsafe, and sickening vapors from the swamp waters were deemed detrimental to public health. By 1820, New York's respectable families had left, and thousands of poor Irish immigrants and recently freed slaves took their place. "They crowded indiscriminately into the old rookeries of the Points, and by 1840 the district had become the most dismal slum section in America."⁷⁴ It did not take long before fights between rival groups broke out over control of the Points, and some of the most animated characters in city history came to light in the process.

The leader of the Bowery Boys in the early-1850s was William Poole, more commonly known as Bill the Butcher (a reference to his actual profession as a butcher). The story of Poole has reached near mythical status. "Poole," writes Herbert Asbury,

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Herbert Asbury, *The Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927), 5.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 9.

“was commonly held to be the champion brawler and eye gouger of his time, and not even the ferocious mayhem experts of the Five Points and the Fourth Ward dared engage him in combat.”⁷⁵ If Poole could be classified as having an archenemy, it would be Irishman John Morrissey, a member of the rival Dead Rabbits gang and a Tammany politician. Having previously received a fearsome mauling at the hands of Poole in a gang altercation, Morrissey sought him out to seek revenge. On February 24, 1855, Poole and Morrissey traded insults at Stanwix Hall, and Morrissey’s associate Lewis Baker shot Poole several times in the chest at point-black range. Poole, acknowledged to be a man of uncommon strength, survived for an amazing eleven days before succumbing to his injuries.⁷⁶

The *Times* reporting of Poole’s death was quite dramatic, with the front page article headlined “The Pugilists’ Encounter.” Despite Poole’s questionable business dealings and recognized gang leadership, the paper presented him in rather honorable terms. “He attended to this business with marked zeal,” wrote the *Times*, “taking pride in his character of a butcher. But his disposition was not of the most peaceable and forbearing kind, and he found himself in frequent quarrels, both with strangers and those whom he well knew. The butcher-boys called him a ‘hard customer,’ and many of them dreaded, while some envied his pugilistic powers.”⁷⁷ It was also noted that Poole’s “manners, when he was not aroused, were generally marked with much

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁷⁶ Peter Adams, *The Bowery Boys: Street Corner Radicals and the Politics of Rebellion* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2005), 132.

⁷⁷ *The New York Times*, “The Pugilists’ Encounter,” March 9, 1855, 1.

politeness...⁷⁸ Most telling, the paper printed Poole's final words, which he whispered "with great distinctness of voice": "I think I am a goner. If I die, I die a true American; and what grieves me most is, thinking that I've been murdered by a set of Irish--by Morrissey in particular."⁷⁹ Poole's near-mythical status was most certainly reflected in the grandeur of his funeral. "We have seen a great many very large popular demonstrations in this City at the funerals of great and distinguished men," remarked the *Times*, "but we remember none that exceeded in numbers that of William Poole."⁸⁰ The funeral procession stretched for two miles and included a fifty-two-piece band and a hearse drawn by four white horses.⁸¹ Thousands crowded the streets and rooftops "to suffocation."⁸²

The display of grief over Poole was indicative of the great deep-seated nativism in New York City, a fact not lost on the *Times*. "A stranger," explained the paper, "knowing nothing of the circumstances of the case, would deem it strange that the death of a man celebrated for nothing but his propensities and faculties for fighting, should call out a popular demonstration at least equal to that witnessed at the obsequies of Jackson, Clay, or Webster. Persons familiar with this City and the peculiar features of this case, however, will have no difficulty in finding an explanation less discreditable to

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ *The New York Times*, "The Funeral of Poole," March 12, 1855, 4.

⁸¹ Adams, 132.

⁸² *The New York Times*, "The Funeral of Poole," March 12, 1855, 4.

our people than the naked facts would imply."⁸³ That explanation, the *Times* clarified, was that "Poole was an American, and had taken an active part in the crusade against foreigners which still enlists so much of public favor."⁸⁴ The death of Bill the Butcher would only serve as a rallying point to the nativist cause. "A nerve had been touched," wrote Elliot J. Gorn. "Poole's murder opened up old wounds, allowing ancient ethnic hatreds to ooze with renewed ugliness."⁸⁵ In fact, organizations such as the Poole Guards and Poole Associations quickly sprung up throughout the city and as far away as Baltimore and Philadelphia.⁸⁶ "It has been felt and believed everywhere," the paper continued, "that Poole was murdered because he was active in the organized Native America interest,--because he was a very difficult man for the foreign rowdies to manage or to conquer. He has been regarded very generally as a *martyr* to the Native American cause."⁸⁷

As the Know-Nothings became more widespread and less secretive, conflicts with immigrant populations became more frequent and more violent. "Scarcely a Sunday passes," noted the *New York Times*, "that our quiet streets are not disturbed by some collision, and that between natives and foreigners."⁸⁸ One such instance was the

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Elliot J. Gorn, "'Good-Bye Boys, I Die a True American': Homicide, Nativism, and Working-Class Culture in Antebellum New York City," *The Journal of American History* 74.2 (September 1987): 391.

⁸⁶ Adams, 132.

⁸⁷ The *New York Times*, "The Funeral of Poole," March 12, 1855, 4.

⁸⁸ The *New York Times*, "Street Preaching in Brooklyn: Serious Riot," June 5, 1854, 8.

Brooklyn riot of 1854. On Sunday, May 28th, sailor and street preacher John S. Orr traveled to Brooklyn to speak against the Roman Catholic church.⁸⁹ There he was heckled and threatened by several (apparently drunken) Irishmen, and was forced to leave. Enraged, he returned the following Sunday, June 4th, clad in a white gown, flourishing a brass trumpet and calling himself the Angel Gabriel. When finished with his anti-Catholic tirade, he marched a crowd of over a thousand nativists through Brooklyn evidently set on burning down St. James' Church.⁹⁰ The Irish fought back with clubs and stones, which the nativists returned with gunfire.⁹¹ The scuffle escalated to include over a thousand rioters, resulting in forty to fifty injuries, and Mayor Edward Lambert was forced to call out the 14th regiment of the New York militia to disperse the crowd.⁹²

The *Times* discussed the riots and Know-Nothings in an uncharacteristically mixed fashion. While denouncing the riot and nativists, it repeatedly referred to the Irish as "drunken" and "ignorant," and described the "half-brutal ignorant Irish peasant" and the "degraded German boor." The paper, then, seemed disappointed the Americans were stooping to the level of the Irish. "Formerly," it wrote, "nothing could stand against the Irish bludgeons of 'the bloody Sixth,' or the slung shot and ready fists of the fighting men in our Irish pot-house. Now rowdyism has spread abroad among

⁸⁹ Anbinder, 29. Orr's diatribes were not confined to New York City. He was also responsible for leading a crowd of nativists in Chelsea, Massachusetts on a vandalism spree that smashed the windows of neighborhood's Catholic church and tore down their cross.

⁹⁰ The *New York Times*, "Street Preaching in Brooklyn: Serious Riot," June 5, 1854, 8.

⁹¹ Burrows, 831.

⁹² The *New York Times*, "Street Preaching in Brooklyn: Serious Riot," June 5, 1854, 8.

the Americans."⁹³ Nonetheless, the *Times* expressed exasperation over the riots and the logic of the nativists. "Among our readers," wrote the *Times*, "must be some who belong to the Associations of 'Know-Nothings;' men who love the Republic and who are not hot-headed or fanatic. We appeal to them, whether in a country like this, inhabited by so many different races and religions, it is prudent or wise, to arouse those terrible passions of Religious and National hatred."⁹⁴

The *Times* also insinuated that this prejudice against Catholics could cause the downfall of a society, much in the same vain that the nativists feared that Catholicism could. "We must remember," the *Times* wrote, "that every nation and every form of Government, which has embraced within itself the elements of mingled and hostile races, has been weak, or has fallen. In Poland, in Hungary, as it was before the Revolution, in the Spanish Republics, there has been the Pariah-race--the race of different blood, different religion, different characteristics;--in each that element has been the weak stone in the structure--the ultimate cause of its fall."⁹⁵ Yet the paper was not totally absolving the immigrants, acknowledging "the eternal and never to be waived right of *freedom of speech*. Our street-preachers, whether they blaspheme Pope or Bible, whether they damn the Scarlet Woman or the Protestant infidels, must be protected; if need be, each street-pulpit with a regiment of soldiers."⁹⁶

⁹³ The *New York Times*, "The Brooklyn Riot," June 6, 1854, 4.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Despite its concerns with their doctrines, the *Times* did marvel at the Know-Nothings' accomplishments. It believed that those who saw the Know-Nothings simply as a party of disappointed office-seekers "do not remember what this movement has done within the space of a few months, in the most intelligent and high minded population of the Union. Without presses, without electioneering, with no prestige or power, it has completely overthrown and swamped the two old historic parties of the country, paralyzed their action, deprived them to a greater or less extent of influence and of office, and now sways public sentiment even where it has not yet absorbed political power."⁹⁷ A movement of this nature, the *Times* continued "cannot proceed from any such petty motive as the mere hunting of office. The great surges of the people are not impelled by any such cause."⁹⁸

The paper also believed that while anti-immigration was a factor in the growth of the party, the greater cause for this reality was the immigrants' abuse of the liberties handed to them, "that under cover of this privilege the pauperism, the ignorance, the crime of the old countries have been emptied out upon our shores with hostile recklessness of our interests and our rights."⁹⁹ Americans, must, the paper declared, avoid the disgrace of the old countries and not designate one race as inferior to another. Yet, true to form, the *Times* was also rather insulting towards the Irish. "There is no doubt of the issue, if Celt and Saxon, Romanist and Protestant, do struggle on our soil.

⁹⁷ *The New York Times*, "The Know-Nothing Movement," December 6, 1854, 4.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

The Irish--the foreign Catholic--will become the degraded, the depressed, the menial race. The Saxon must gain victory. But what a victory will it be!"¹⁰⁰ Still, the *Times* was less than pleased, with the Know-Nothings' choice to officially deem themselves the American Party. "No party in this country," stated the *Times*, "has any right to call itself *the* American party, for, by so doing, they accuse all who do not join them of being Anti-American and traitorous If the Know-Nothings, or any other party, choose to call themselves the American party, their opponents have a right to resent it as an imputation upon themselves, and should never recognize them by their assumed title."¹⁰¹

Ostentatious actions such as this and occurrences such as the Brooklyn riot helped to speed this "true American" organization to their end. The presidential election of 1856 saw all the Know-Nothing hopes for national recognition dashed. Their presidential candidate, former president Millard Fillmore, received a mere eight of the possible 296 electoral votes, and lost disheartened to Democrat James Buchanan (who won with 174 votes over John Fremont's 114). The consequences of the defeat were known immediately. "The American Party," wrote the *Times*, "will never again enjoy such favorable opportunities for obtaining possession of the State and General Government as it did in the late election, and its upper defeat now will give it a staggering blow from which it can never recover."¹⁰² A notable decrease after 1855 in

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ The *New York Times*, "Americanism," June 26, 1855, 4.

¹⁰² The *New York Times*, "The American Vote in the State of New-York," November 6, 1856, 4.

the number of immigrants landing in America coupled with the rising concerns of slavery and disunion focused voters attention elsewhere, and just as quickly as the Know-Nothings and the nativist movement came to prominence, they were returned back to the ranks of the minor parties.

IV. INTERESTS AND INTRIGUES OF SOCIETY

SPIRITUALISM

“It is a strange chapter in the history of human credulity at all events,” wrote George Templeton Strong, “and as such worth investigating.”¹ The “chapter” that Strong speaks of is the fascinating and somewhat peculiar phenomenon of Spiritualism.² Séances, things that are today usually confined to Halloween celebrations or theatrical shows, were a legitimate form of religious expression in the 1850s and garnered hoards of followers. Both ridiculed and embraced, superstitious and rational, Spiritualism took hold in a time at American history that was also straddling conflicting concepts as the old culture was reconciling itself with the new society, and often catching its citizens in between.

Spiritualism, in simple terms, is the belief that the deceased can be communicated with and that these spirits have ministering abilities. Spirits were contacted through the séances or the talents of mediums, who were almost always women. Spirit communication, as out of step as it may seem with the conventional nature of Victorians, was far from unprecedented. Besides its prominent presence in Judeo-Christian religiosity, spirit communion had also appeared in several new

¹ George Templeton Strong, *The Diary of George Templeton Strong*, vol. II, ed. Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas (New York: Octagon Books, 1974), 93.

² While whether or not Spiritualism is considered a religion varies by author, Bret E. Carroll’s work, which I use extensively, does consider it a religion, and I therefore present Spiritualism as a capitalized term.

religions of the nineteenth century. In 1820, Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, claimed to have received the Book of Mormon from a visiting angel, and he retained his leadership over the church in part due to the perceived connection between Smith and the spirit world. In the 1830s and 1840s, the Shakers experienced abundant spiritual activity, and some considered themselves the forerunners of the Spiritualist movement. The late 1840s also saw a splinter group of the Church of the New Jerusalem replicate Emanuel Swedenborg's practice of spiritual communication.³ "Clearly, Spiritualism bloomed in a cultural soil that had been prepared for it."⁴

Victorians, for their part, had built up a culture that possessed a near obsession with death.⁵ This fixation is witnessed in the literature, theology and consumer materials the age produced. Shops sold mourning costumes, black-trimmed note cards, and black crepe to be strewn about at funerals. Locketts enclosing cameos of a deceased loved one became treasured objects, particularly among the working poor. Publishing houses created mourning manuals that instructed mourners in such things as their specific dress and corresponding obligations. "These intricate rituals of middle-class

³ Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) was a Swedish mystic who claimed an ability to visit both heaven and hell, and to converse freely with angels, demons, and spirits. For more information, see Signe Toksvig's *Emanuel Swedenborg: Scientist and Mystic* (New Haven: Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1948).

⁴ Bret E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 8.

⁵ For a fascinating account of how this obsession was witness during and affected by the Civil War, see Drew Gilpin Faust's *The Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).

sentimental culture effectively shifted the social focus from the dead to the living, from those who were mourned to the mourners themselves.”⁶

A familiarity with spirit communication and an emphasis on death was coupled with the state of America in the 1850s to allow Spiritualism’s rise. Industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and the growth of commercial capitalism combined in a reshaping of the northeast social scene, leaving many feeling lost in the shuffle and without control. Economic changes left many with a sense of insecurity, and the emergence of a mass democratic political culture meant new politicians with new methods were taking hold of the government. The Revolutionary generation was dying (John Quincy Adams--considered by many to be the last major members of that generation--died in 1848), and with them so were republican values and connections to the past. “The result,” writes Carroll, “was a sense of disappointment and despair. The fabric of American life seemed to be unraveling, stretched and torn by forces which promoted selfishness, materialism, fragmentation, and atomization as Americans drifted away from the past and toward modernity.” Spiritualism was one of America’s attempts at retaining that life.⁷

Spiritualism, then, can be understood as a counter movement against America’s progressiveness. Anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace has termed this religious and cultural ‘revitalization.’ Per Wallace’s theory, “enormous social and cultural change can elicit attempts to energize society through the restoration of an older, purer, and

⁶ Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 9.

⁷ Carroll, 2-3.

disappearing state. Sharing Spiritualists' concern with the apparently amoral direction in which American society seemed to be moving, the spirit voices they heard reassured them in a form of wish-fulfillment that human society was being controlled from above and molded into conformity with a spiritual reality that resembled a comfortably familiar but disappearing past. Such assurances helped them both to resist and to accommodate to disorienting developments on earth."⁸ Also, while Spiritualists may seem to have been at odds with the established Christian religions already rooted in America, many saw spirit communion as a natural movement within their doctrines. For someone to consider themselves a "spiritualist Christian" was not uncommon. "If [Spiritualists] felt uncomfortably alone as their God seemed to fade into abstractness and adrift in a new world that required them to rely on themselves and other human beings, if they sought spiritual meaning as theocentric notions of religious authority were gradually giving way to anthropocentric ones, what more appropriate religious response than an ideology focusing specifically on the semidevine human spirit midway between humanity and deity?"⁹

While primarily drawing from the middle classes, Spiritualism appealed to a broad array of followers who were attracted by the religion's seeming stability. As Bret E. Carroll explains:

Those who embraced Spiritualist religion often had backgrounds suggesting a restless disapproval of the status quo and an openness to new and progressive philosophies. They usually came from such liberal religions as Swedenborgianism, Universalism, Quakerism, and, to a lesser

⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁹ Ibid., 7.

extent, Unitarianism, Transcendentalism, and rationalism, each of which contributed not only members to the Spiritualist movement but also ideas to its religious ideology. They often moved through more than one of these belief systems before drifting into Spiritualism. They also tended to be committed to one or more of such causes as temperance, women's rights, abolitionism, communitarianism, phrenology, and mesmerism, as well as dietary, dress, marriage, and medical reform. Their desire for order and spiritual fulfillment eventually led them to seek communion with spirits and to create their new religion.¹⁰

This description of the Spiritualist model may explain why the religion found so little support from Strong and the *New York Times*. Both Strong and the *Times* were self-proclaimed conservatives, who had little need or want of challenging the status quo. Neither were vehement supporters of any specific social movements (at least not until the outbreak of the civil war), and therefore looked at the Spiritualists with skepticism, distrust, and often blatant mocking.

The *New York Times* did not initially criticize Spiritualism, but instead reported on it with no opinion at all. Accounts of spirit communication were printed in the *Times* without editorial comment or judgment, and were instead presented dryly in a purely factual manner. An article appearing in November of 1854, related an account by Judge John Worth Edmonds of spirit communication with the passengers of the *Arctic* steamboat disaster.¹¹ According to Edmonds, over a hundred spirits were present

¹⁰ Ibid., 4. Although this seems to contradict Carroll's earlier view that Spiritualism was a move against anti-Progressivism, both sides were in fact working towards what they saw as their utopian vision of America. What that vision constituted, however, was a matter of opinion, and in this way Spiritualism represented different things to different people. See Ann Braude's *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2001) for more information.

¹¹ The *Arctic* had collided with another ship off the coast of Cape Race, Newfoundland on September 27, 1854, killing nearly four hundred passengers and crew. Particularly, none of the women or

during the communication and several made direct contact, relating to him their last thoughts as the ships was going down and their efforts to save themselves and others. Amazingly, a few spirits even made a point of saying how foolish they were to ever doubt the legitimacy of spiritualism.¹² An article presented the following month relayed a visit from the spirit of Napoleon, whose spirit, made known to a man from Williamsburg, Pennsylvania, conveyed his views on a recently published biography of himself and prophesized that a European crown would be assassinated within three months time.¹³

However, the *Times'* unbiased reporting of Spiritualism died a quick death, as reports soon surfaced that followers of Spiritualism had been driven mad by their experiences. On December 12, 1854, the *Times* reported that a Mr. A.B. Wyncoop, a prominent citizen and editor in Waukegan, California was now an inmate of an insane asylum after being driven mad by Spiritualism. Wyncoop, the paper wrote, "had become a believer in 'Spiritualism,' so called, and the spirits had invited him to knock down every person whom he heard doubting the truth of the spirit theory. He attempted to obey the command so often and persistently that no recourse was left but to lock him up in a mad-house, where he now is, a hopeless lunatic."¹⁴ Another report a little over a year later described how John Crowley of Philadelphia had attempted to

children aboard survived, leading the crewmen to be accused of cowardice. David W. Shaw, *The Sea Shall Embrace Them: The Tragic Story of the Steamship Arctic* (New York: Simon & Shuster Press, 2002).

¹² The *New York Times*, "Spiritualism," November 13, 1854, 5.

¹³ The *New York Times*, "Spiritualism-Napoleon's Prophecies," December 2, 1854, 1.

¹⁴ The *New York Times*, "Melancholy Insanity," December 12, 1854, 2.

murder his mother with a hatchet at the instigation of spirits. A practicing Spiritualist for two years, Crowley stuck his mother twice in head and once on the wrist for the purpose of, as he put it, "knocking some sense into her."¹⁵ After incidents such as these became recurrent, the *Times* seemed to switch their reporting technique to one that mocked the Spiritualists' techniques and ideology. For example, a January 1855 article told the story of an auctioneer who was visited by the deceased man on whose old tea kettle he had bid. The spirit frightened the auctioneer and demanded the tea kettle's return, "and soon after the tea-kettle aforesaid was among the missing, and I do not know that it has been heard to simmer since."¹⁶

While the *Times* did continue to report on the popularity and spread of Spiritualism (a February 1855 article noted that at least 3,500 followers came to hear speakers at the Tabernacle auditorium), it also continued to provoke the Spiritualists at any opportunity.¹⁷ When a local resident reported that \$50,000 of gold coin had been stolen by "somebody in or out of the flesh--we in our blindness think the former category the most probable--," the *Times* encouraged those ever-present spirits to put themselves to good use, especially as a \$15,000 reward was offered for identification of the culprits:

We therefore respectfully propose to all spirits who have poor relations still on earth; some good old mother, or suffering impoverished wife, or orphan beloved child with an almshouse or a worse fate waiting greedily to receive it: to such spirit we propose an immediate revelation to such

¹⁵ The *New York Times*, "Shocking Affair-The Fruits of Spiritualism," December 21, 1855, 8.

¹⁶ The *New York Times*, "A Departed Spirit Sending for His Tea-Kettle," January 24, 1855, 5.

¹⁷ The *New York Times*, "Spiritualism," February 17, 1855, 4.

poor relative of the spot where the gold is, and the people who took it; solely in order that the relative aforesaid may get possession of the fifteen thousand, and that his or her heart may sing for joy. We would merely suggest, for the sake of avoiding confusion, that they do not all speak at once.¹⁸

The language used to describe the scene at Spiritualist meetings was no friendlier, either. Miss Judah, a purported medium entranced, was “[w]ith closed eyes and spasmodic quiverings, impelled by ‘unseen agencies,’ she commenced by asserting ‘that Spiritualism is true, nevertheless,’ and delivered herself freely and gracefully of a pretty string of pretty phrases, signifying nothing.”¹⁹

Occasionally the *Times* went beyond what it saw as Spiritualism’s ridiculousness and branded it downright offensive and disrespectful. Spiritualism, as it saw it, constituted an assault on the deceased. “There was a time,” lamented the paper, “when, by living a pure life, one could secure himself from ‘after torments,’ but if there be truth to Spiritualism, that time has passed. Do what you will now, any elderly female can make you come at her bidding and stay with her just as long as she likes.”²⁰ By not allowing the world to rest in peace, Spiritualists were circumventing the natural order of life, “dragging [spirits] either from Abraham’s bosom or from the Devil’s clutches . . . to rap on the tables or discase the nerves of any lady who is anxious for full development, as a so-called, Spiritual Medium.”²¹ Attempts by Spiritualists to

¹⁸ The *New York Times*, “A Chance for Spiritualists,” October 17, 1855, 4.

¹⁹ The *New York Times*, “Spiritualism,” July 9, 1855, 4.

²⁰ The *New York Times*, “Spiritualism at Greenwood,” September 21, 1855, 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*

explain their belief system were equally rebuffed. A review appeared of Reverend A. Mahan's volume on Spiritualism entitled *Modern Mysteries Explained and Exposed*, which he claimed to have "now satisfactory explained" the authenticity of Spiritualism and was "a work which would stand the most rigid test of criticism."²² The *Times*, characteristically bashed the book as lacking both logic and an argument. "We sigh," wrote the paper, "for some means of explaining the explanation, and we do not attempt rigid or any other criticism on a book which we find it impossible to understand."²³

The reform movements associated with Spiritualism were also not particularly helpful in endearing the religion to the conservative press and public. The group most predominantly connected to it was that of the women's rights movement.²⁴ As Ann Braude explains, "Every religious worldview must participate in the construction of gender if it is to provide a comprehensive vocabulary of meanings and actions from managing experience and interpreting reality. We should not be surprised, then, that a reform movement aimed at altering the roles and relations of men and women should find allies--sometimes unwelcome--within a religious movement committed to critiquing basic theological principles and religious structures."²⁵ Mediums, as made clear, were overwhelmingly women, and as Spiritualism grew in popularity these

²² The *New York Times*, "Untitled," September 7, 1855, 1.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ For an overview of the American women's rights movement prior to the Civil War, see Sylvia D. Hoffert's *When Hens Crow: The Women's Rights Movement in Antebellum America* (Bloomington: The Indiana University Press, 1995).

²⁵ Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), xv.

women were able to advance themselves in society and standing as well. The connection between Spiritualism and reform was generally not favorable in the press. A *Times* headline reporting on Vermont's Rutland Convention announced the gathering of "Free-Lovers--Spiritualists--Trance-Mediums--Abolitionists--And All Sorts of Queer People."²⁶ The Convention was a symbolic meeting in which these various fringe groups asserted their "platform" on a myriad of different social topics. Unsurprisingly, Spiritualism was resolved to be a true phenomenon and women were resolved to be "politically, industrially, educationally and socially" equal to men.²⁷

Despite the *Times*' best efforts, Spiritualism did not die out immediately. It in fact surged in popularity during the Civil War, a likely reactor to the dramatic increase in casualties. Even Mary Todd Lincoln, crippled by grief over the loss of her son Willie, conducted séances in the White House to try to connect with his spirit.²⁸ Although the movement suffered disrepute after a wave of exposures of fraudulent séance practices in the 1870s, a push for a national organization continued. The National Association of Spiritualists was formed in 1893 and established formal institutional structures. Yet regardless of the attempts at standardizing and regulating the religion, Spiritualist practices became more and more theatrical and less reputable by the end of the nineteenth century. By the twentieth century, the movement that had once entranced

²⁶ *The New York Times*, "Radicals in Council," June 29, 1858, 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2006), 422.

thousands of New Yorkers and thousands more nationally had been reduced to entertainment for those seeking, not a sense of order, but simply a sense of excitement.²⁹

MAINE LIQUOR LAWS AND THE TEMPERENCE MOVEMENT

Prohibition is generally a topic associated with early twentieth-century America, but its history is much longer and more complicated than the bootleggers of the 1920s. The Temperance movement was a significant development of the 1850s that not only encompassed alcohol abuse, but also focused on society at large. “Important as temperance was for antebellum social customs, its significance far exceeded the narrow question of the consumption of alcohol. Temperance reformers championed their cause not to eliminate liquor alone but to eradicate the central social problems of Jacksonian society: crime, immorality, poverty, and insanity.”³⁰ Social reformers latched on to the temperance cause in efforts to solve the social chaos that they saw swirling around them.

As the panic of 1837 that engulfed the nation soon developed into a full-blown depression, New York City’s residents latched on to the comforts of religious worship. Many citizens had resisted evangelical recruitment during the boom years earlier in the decade and focused, instead, on labor organization. Yet when the economic crisis destroyed the vitality of their unions, workers increasingly packed churches and

²⁹ Carroll, 177-179.

³⁰ Ian R. Tyrrell, *Sobering Up: From Temperance to Prohibition in Antebellum America, 1800-1860* (Westport: Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979) 5.

tabernacles to take in sermons and lectures. "Upper- and middle-class worshipers flocked to Episcopalian and Presbyterian churches to hear ministers declare the panic to be God's punishment for the sin of greed and the evil of reckless speculation. Plebeian Protestants, too, filled churches as workshops emptied."³¹ The temperance movement, always closely connected to religious organizations, likewise gained attractiveness as Americans, already in hard times, saw drink as making those times even harder.

New York state's temperance movement gained ground with the founding of the New York Washington Temperance Society in 1841 (the first Washington Temperance Society had been formed in Baltimore a year earlier).³² "Many in the panic-strengthened sects took the temperance pledge hoping Washingtonianism would bring order and self-respect to depression-buffed lives. With elites insisting that poverty was a sign of dissoluteness, sobriety was a way of attesting respectability."³³ Within six months, the state's Society claimed twenty thousand members over fifty chapters. Thousands of women, fed up with watching their drinking husbands squander precious wages and savings, joined the Martha Washingtonians. Before long, "Washingtonian temperance became the largest popular movement in New York City's history."³⁴

³¹ Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 628.

³² Ironically, although the Society was named for George Washington, the former president was one of the largest distillers in the new republic.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 629.

Temperance's activism was split between two factions: the secular and the Evangelical. The secular, most notably the Washingtonians, rejected pious coercion and conversion in Christ. "From the earliest formulation of the temperance ethos," noted Jack S. Blocker, "reformers learned that they would have to deploy more than biblical arguments if they were to succeed in a materialistic and pluralistic society. Accordingly, they pictured their reform as indispensable to individual health and social welfare, as well as necessary to salvation and attainment of the millennium. By framing their arguments in secular terms temperance reformers helped to undermine the churches' claims for divine sanction as the basis for social action. Recognizing the threat, most churches maintained arm's-length distance between themselves and the zealous dries."³⁵ Noting drinking's role within the male working-class, the Washington Society organized activities to draw its targets out of the bars and saloons with alcohol-free amusements such as steamboat excursions, dances, concerts, bazaars, picnics and the like. In contrast, the Evangelical group, particularly the American Temperance Union (founded in 1833), was highly critical of this secular motivation. At their meetings, members listened to doctors and clergymen declare the evils of liquor and alcoholism.³⁶

Despite the temperance movement's popularity it was by no means universally embraced. By 1849, there were 5,780 licensed liquor stores, porter houses, taverns and saloons in New York City, many of which were not thrilled by the temperance societies'

³⁵ Jack S. Blocker, Jr. *American Temperance Movements: Cycles of Reform* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1989), xiv.

³⁶ Burrows 628-629.

effect on their business. Temperance advocates who opened a mission next door to a German beer garden saw the outraged customers throw bottles through their windows and heave rocks against their door. More formal opposition also materialized in the Liquor Dealers' Protective Union, a pressure group established by alcohol purveyors such as merchant importers and waterfront barkeeps. The group boasted more than eight hundred members by 1855 and sponsored meetings to help crystallize antiprohibition sentiment.³⁷

New York state's legislative history of temperance began in 1854. After attempts by New York City's council to implement a temperance law on a city level failed, Senator Darius Monroe introduced a bill to the state senate on January 5. Modeled after Maine's liquor law, the bill sought to make liquor illegal as a beverage and only available for medicinal purposes.³⁸ Interest in the application of the Maine law in other locales was acute, as the questions of the law's enforceability generally outweighed questions of its merit. Readers of the *New York Times* were frequently updated on the state of such laws in other cities. Shortly after the bill's introduction to the New York Senate, the *Times* reported from Lowell, Massachusetts, where a similar statute had already been passed. The reported noted that, while the initial passage of the law saw the closing of saloons and liquor stores, the sale and procurement of liquor quickly

³⁷ Ibid. 776-777.

³⁸ The Maine Liquor Law was one of the first statutory temperance laws implemented on a large scale. Passed in Maine in 1851 at the hands of Neal Dow, Portland's mayor, it banned the sale of all alcoholic beverages except those for medicinal purposes. For more on the law's beginnings and architect, see Frank L. Bryne's *Prophet of Prohibition: Neal Dow and His Crusade* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1961).

returned under more stealthy means. "The city authorities," wrote the *Times*, "have not seen fit to order prosecutions, and zealous temperance people have not seen fit to make complaints, so that now there is probably as much liquor sold in the city as before the law went into effect."³⁹ This picture was not far from what New York City would soon experience.

Although Monroe's bill was passed by both the senate and the assembly, it was vetoed by Governor Horatio Seymour, who found the bill "unconstitutional, unjust and oppressive in its character, and subversive of well settled principles of the legislation."⁴⁰ The governor also declared the law unenforceable, predicting much of the same result previously seen in Lowell and other communities. "The idea pervades the law," continued Seymour, "that unusual, numerous, and severe penalties will lead to its enforcement, but all experience shows that the undue severity of laws defeats their execution. After the excitement which enacted them has passed away, no one feels disposed to enforce them; for no law can be sustained which goes beyond public feeling and sentiment."⁴¹ Without the numbers necessary to override the governor's veto, the bill was never passed.

However, the following year, when a Governor Myron Clark had been elected, temperance advocates tried again, and this time, were successful. The new law, technically titled the "Act for the Prevention of Intemperance, Paupers, and Crime" but

³⁹ The *New York Times*, "The 'Maine Liquor Law' in Lowell," January 19, 1854, 2.

⁴⁰ The *New York Times*, "The Maine Law: Veto Message of Governor Seymour," April 3, 1854, 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

still commonly referred to as the Maine Liquor Law, made the sale of liquor illegal and contained harsh punishments for those convicted of supplying liquor to the public. First offenders were fined fifty dollars plus costs and four months in prison; the second offense, fifty dollars plus costs and six months imprisonment; and third offense costing one hundred dollars plus costs and a year imprisonment. Those caught intoxicated were required to disclose where they obtained their liquor to avoid jail time themselves. The *Times* warned their readers not to test the punishments for the law: "Be sure, drinkers, venders, guzzlers, sippers, all, that in our town at least, the Prohibitory Law will be enforced. Betting men may 'go their pile' on that, and those who do not bet, may safely 'reckon' it will."⁴²

The *Times*, for its opinion, offered a mixed review of the law. While applauding what it attempted to accomplish, it gave no confidence in its ability to succeed. "The dreadful and constantly increasing evils of intemperance," wrote the *Times*, "which press themselves everywhere upon public attention, have inclined the best portion of the community to favor any measure which promised relief. We have never believed that such a law as this could be generally enforced in the large cities of this State, by any means which a regard for the public good would sanction. We are not sanguine as to the result of the experiment about to be tried."⁴³ Others had a more optimistic view of enforcement. After Mayor Fernando Wood instituted a "dry day" one Sunday in January 1855 as a test of the law (before it was officially set to begin enforcement in

⁴² The *New York Times*, "The Liquor Bill Passed, April 7, 1855, 4.

⁴³ The *New York Times*, "The Maine Law Passed," March 25, 1854, 4.

July), a letter to the editor declared the law as enforceable as any other. Signed only by the name "Reform," the author noted the how quiet and orderly the streets were without unruly drunks roaming them. "Of course," noted the writer, "the law against open liquor shops on Sunday is not *always* enforced--of course, the laws against stealing are not *always* adequate to catch the rogue--of course, the laws against nuisances are not *always* sufficient to abate them, and so on through the whole calendar. But are these reasons why these laws should be taken off the statute book? Just so with the 'Maine law.' I fully believe, if enacted, it can be as readily enforced as the laws above referred to."⁴⁴

Questions of implementation aside, the general public in New York and various other cities welcomed the passage and celebrated accordingly. Parades and processions in the streets featured symbolic portrayals of the misery of drunkenness: a wretched woman with a bottle to her mouth and young children by her side, a fat man whose bloated belly sank to his knees, a gaunt, impoverished man wearing rags for clothes. "With solemn tread the procession moved through the streets, greeting with cheers the residences of those who had been prominent in delivering them from the 'enemy' whose death they celebrated; and they finally wound up the exhibition during the evening by those demonstrations of affection usually manifested in parting with an old familiar friend."⁴⁵ On the other side, Anti-Maine Law meetings sprung up with equally fervent responses. A speech by a Captain Rynders declared that damage to the city's

⁴⁴ The *New York Times*, "Why Have the Maine Law?," January 20, 1855, 20.

⁴⁵ The *New York Times*, "Temperance in Connecticut," August 14, 1854, 1.

reputation by international visitors “who are strangers to tyrannous restraints so degrading to the character of freemen, and so intolerable to habits of self-control and undisputed personal liberty, may be regarded as inevitable.”⁴⁶

Once the Maine Law came into effect in the city on July 4, 1855, the *Times* quickly took on the roll of a glorified police blotter. Names and offenses were published daily: Daniel McDermot, got liquor in Gold-street House; Ludwig Dugan, found on Water street, lying on the sidewalk; Mary Tracy, can’t tell where she got liquor.⁴⁷ Rumors began swirling that young boys were being paid to spy on hotels and establishments, and officials were soon suspected of keeping the liquor they seized for their own uses or resale.⁴⁸ The most detrimental occurrence to the temperance cause was an incident in Portland, Maine that saw the movement’s first bloodshed. In order to disburse a mob angrily protesting prohibition, Mayor Neal Dow ordered out his militia who fired upon the group. The *Times* believed “that no harm would have been done, beyond, the breaking in of a window, but for the war-like motions of the Mayor. But the Mayor, doubtless, felt that his honor was a stake, and he commanded the Rifle Guard to fire, and the deplorable result was the instant death of one poor man, and the wounding of several others.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ The *New York Times*, “The Liquor Dealers’ Demonstration,” April 28, 1855, 4.

⁴⁷ The *New York Times*, “Prohibitory Law,” August 3, 1855, 3.

⁴⁸ The *New York Times*, “The Liquor Law in Maine,” October 31, 1855, 1.

⁴⁹ The *New York Times*, “The Riot in Portland,” June 5, 1855, 4.

The Maine law's demise was consequently clearly at hand. The Supreme Judicial Court of Maine ruled that justices of the peace, police and municipal judges have no powers to try or sentence for the offense of selling liquor, and that only it had that right, and then only after a grand jury indictment. By severely curtailing the city's ability to prosecute offenders, the decision effectively nullified the law.⁵⁰

New York soon followed suit. In 1857, the Supreme Court in Albany declared the law unconstitutional and that selling liquor was not an indictable offense for those that have a license.⁵¹ In place of the Maine Law was passed a new Liquor Excise Law, which made the sale of liquor forbidden only on Sundays or election days and forbade sale by those who did not have a proper license. Requirements to obtain a license, however, such as acquiring the signatures of at least thirty resident freeholders attesting to the applicant's good moral character, were made so severe that it was estimated that over ninety percent of all saloons in the city would be run out of business anyways.⁵²

Less than a year later, the New York Temperance Society began efforts to get a prohibition article into the state constitution. The *Times* was less than enthused. "This is certainly a radical movement," wrote the *Times*, "and if it had any chance of success would be important. That it has none whatever, it is needless to say. The attempt to enforce an absolute prohibition in this State has had too recent a trial, and too signal a

⁵⁰ The *New York Times*, "Untitled," July 2, 1855, 3.

⁵¹ The *New York Times*. "The Liquor Law," October 10, 1857, 4.

⁵² Burrows, 838.

failure to afford encouragement for its renewal.”⁵³ Just as this round in the temperance movement was not the first, it was also not the last. Supporters would continue to expound the virtues of temperance, but would not see similar success (and failure) until the 1920s and 1930s.

SENSATIONAL SCANDALS

“I have never killed a man, but I have read many obituaries with great pleasure.”⁵⁴ This quote by American attorney Clarence Darrow could be applied to the great majority of New Yorkers in the 1850s. Sensationalist journalism was in full force in New York City, and nothing captivated the public like the spectacle of a murder. Of the many murders that occurred during the decade of the 1850s, one in particular stood out, that of Dr. Harvey Burdell. A wealthy and well-respected member of the city, Burdell’s murder and its subsequent investigation offer classic examples of the sensational and emotional journalism that typified the New York press and the era of the mid-1800s.

The formation America’s penny press gave rise to sensational journalism. The papers, as former Mayor Philip Hone noted, “are hawked about the streets by a gang of troublesome, ragged boys, and in which scandal is retailed to all who delight in it, at

⁵³ *The New York Times*, “Temperance Movement,” May 22, 1858, 4.

⁵⁴ Irving Stone, *Clarence Darrow for the Defense: A Biography* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1941).

that moderate price."⁵⁵ The decreasing price of producing papers allowed for a larger variety of topics to be printed; more pages meant that there were not only articles on standard reading such as finance and foreign affairs, but there also was room for more intriguing topics such as violence, marriages, gossip, and the like. Traditional sixpenny editors preferred not to discuss such sordid issues, but the more affordable press gave the public a forum in which to address issues most pressing to their daily lives.⁵⁶

America in the mid-1800s had "a dynamic in which threats of bodily violence and humiliation were tied to categories of public reputation and economic status. Public attacks upon one's 'honor' seem to have signified the need for equally public and often bodily retaliation against one's accuser. In these instances the public self being circulated in the city's papers was closely related to the private, bodily self; the two were not autonomous."⁵⁷

The papers' topics were not the only defining characteristic of sensational journalism. The language of the reporters and graphicness of the writing were also attributes that set such presses apart. In his study of newspapers accounts of disasters in the nineteenth-century, Michael Barton noticed that a "reporter's empathy with the tragedy and its victims appears total. Readers do not have to imagine that the event was sad; they are specifically told it was 'sad.' They are not left to imagine how survivors felt; they are specifically told that survivors 'mourn.' And the reporter

⁵⁵ David Anthony, "The Helen Jewett Panic: Tabloids, Men, and the Sensational Public Sphere in Antebellum New York," *American Literature* 69.3 (September 1997): 493.

⁵⁶ Burrows, 539.

⁵⁷ Anthony, 495.

includes his own emotions in the story, his 'melancholy reflections' on this 'distressing' and 'painful' event and its 'heart-rending' conclusion. For readers, the emotional investigation and modeling are fairly thorough."⁵⁸ This type of reporting was not that surprising when considering the Victorian era's fascination with death and mourning. "Call this tendency romanticism, Victorianism, sentimentalism, Dionysianism, or simply emotionalism, it was one of the defining characteristics of American public and private expressive life in the 1800s."⁵⁹

This penny press was not the only contemporary writing to identify the 1850s as a sensation-filled era. In 1846 Edgar Allen Poe wrote "that the sensationalism of the press was having an effect 'probably beyond all calculation'"; Ralph Waldo Emerson's journal noted that Americans were "reading all day murder & railroad accidents," while Henry David Thoreau's discussed the "startling and monstrous events as fill the daily papers;" Walt Whitman "noted the special scurrility of American newspapers," Nathaniel Hawthorne was a "lifelong addict of popular newspapers" and Herman Melville "kept a close eye on the sensational press, which often featured bizarre or freakish images."⁶⁰ What the penny press was "revealing, then," continues Barton, "in its moderately sensationalist way, is the kind of emotional discourse that prevailed in

⁵⁸ Michael Barton, "Journalistic Gore: Disaster Reporting and Emotional Discourse in the *New York Times*, 1852-1956," in *An Emotional History of the United States*, ed. by Peter N. Stearns and Jan Lewis (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 158.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 161.

the 1850s.”⁶¹ The murder of Dr. Burdell fits perfectly into the era’s focus on individual affairs and penchant for expressive and dramatic reporting, and as such were irresistible to the reading public.

New York Times readers awoke on February 2, 1857 to headlines of “TERRIBLE TRAGEDY,” and “FRIGHTFUL MUTILATION OF THE BODY.” The victim was forty-six year old well-respected dentist Dr. Harvey Burdell. Found by his office-boy at his office and residence at 31 Bond Street, Burdell had been strangled and stabbed in more than fifteen places, each wound severe enough to be fatal on its own. “The body,” the *Times* reported, “was lying upon the floor, shockingly mutilated, and surrounded with clots of blood, and the door and walls of the room besmeared with blood.”⁶² Though no arrests had been made, the paper took it upon itself to begin an informal investigation as to who the assailant might be. “Robbery appears not to have been the incentive to the murder, as none of the doctor’s papers were disturbed. It must have been done by some one well acquainted with the house.”⁶³ The *Times* then proceeded to fill the entire front page with printed accounts of the sworn statements of Burdell’s housemates and neighbors.

Yet just one article, even if it did encompass the entirety of the front page, was not enough coverage for a sensation such as this. Two other articles appeared in that day’s paper, both relaying the horror of the even and one recounting previous murders

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² The *New York Times*, “Terrible Tragedy,” February 2, 1857, 1.

⁶³ Ibid.

the city has had to endure. "The murder of Dr. Burdell is one of the most startling incidents of the current history of the metropolis. The mystery that thus far surrounds it adds greatly to its intrinsic horror. Our City has been the scene of very many tragedies equally bloody and brutal, and some that remain to this day shrouded in equal darkness."⁶⁴ The murders the article recounted were all those still unsolved: a Mr. Corlies, a Mr. Leutner, a Mr. Burke, and so on and so forth. Thus, the paper was quick to warn the police of the repercussions should they neglect to discover the guilty party in the Burdell case. "A failure to detect the perpetrator of this atrocity will cast the deepest reproach upon the detective Police, and the general administration of justice in this City. The failure to trace the various murders we have already mentioned to their perpetrators, has already involved the authorities in great discredit."⁶⁵

The following day, despite the paper's assertion that the new day "did not bring anything fresh to light," again saw the story on the whole of the front page, and an additional two articles within that day's paper. The reporter's awareness to detail also did not subside. "A child's story-book lying among other books, on the piano in the front drawing-room attracted some attention by its being disfigured in two or three places with smears of blood, as if a bloody hand had taken hold of it. A portion of one . . . of the pages so disfigured had been cut away. Scarcely anything of importance, however, can be attached to this discovery."⁶⁶ The coverage continued, and every day

⁶⁴ The *New York Times*, "The Bond-street Murder," February 2, 1857, 4.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ The *New York Times*, "The Bond-Street Murder," February 3, 1857, 1.

article after article appeared, often simply regurgitating old information when there were no new developments on which to report. Even the *Times* seemed to be surprised by the interest retained in the case after the initial shock had worn off:

It still remains the all-absorbing topic of conversation--if other things are touched on, it is only incidentally,--and conversation drifts back to the strange murder--as if it held all ears--all tongues, with a horrid spell. The weather, the streets, which under ordinary circumstances would be the first subject in all out-door people's thoughts, are scarcely mentioned. In the cars, the ferry-boats, the hotels, bar-rooms, saloons--in all public places, and, so far as we can hear, in all private retreats, it is the subject of discussion, surmise, revery [*sic*]. We have never known excitement so universal, so intense, and so long unflagging in New York.⁶⁷

George Templeton Strong was likewise amazed at the level interest in the fate of Dr. Burdell. "The excitement about the matter," wrote Strong four days after the murder, "exceeds that produced by any crime of violence committed here in my time, even the Colt and Helen Jewett cases. Through all this miserable weather a crowd of several hundred people of all classes is in permanent position in front of the house. Well-dressed women occupy the doorsteps of houses on the opposite side of Bond Street, and stare steadily at No. 31, and seem to derive relief from protracted contemplation of its front door."⁶⁸

⁶⁷ The *New York Times*, "The Bond-Street Murder," February 7, 1857, 1.

⁶⁸ Strong, 321. The Colt case concerned the murder of Samuel Adams, a creditor of John C. Colt, who disappeared after making a visit to Colt to collect money in 1841. It was later revealed that Colt had murdered Adams with a hatchet, stuffed his body in a packaging crate and set it on a ship bound for New Orleans. The body was discovered and Colt, who claimed self-defense, was found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging. When guards went to fetch Colt from his cell on the day of the hanging, they found him lying on the floor, dead from self-inflicted knife wound to the chest. How Colt obtained the knife was never discovered. The Jewett case involved the murder of Helen Jewett, an upscale prostitute who was found dead in her room of a brothel in 1836. She had been stuck in the head with a hatchet several times and set on fire, her body being charred on one side. Richard Robinson, a 19-year-old frequent client of Jewett's was charged and tried for her murder. As the prosecution's witnesses were

The *Times* was not even content to cover merely the facts of the case. The emotional tendency discussed by Barton ring true in the Burdell case as well, as the paper found it pertinent to produce a poem on the subject. Titled “Midnight in The House of Murder,” it was written by Elizabeth Oakes Smith and inspired by the *Times* printing of transcripts of the coroner’s inquest.⁶⁹

other prostitutes, their testimonies were disregarded and Robinson, despite obvious guilt was found not guilty and released. For more information on the Jewett case and its sensational coverage, see Patricia Cline Cohen’s *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998).

⁶⁹ Laura Crawley, “Smith, Elizabeth Oakes,” in *American National Biography*, ed. by John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Elizabeth Oakes Smith (1806-1893) was an American poet, author and lecturer most noted for her writings on women’s rights.

Up the staircase--slowly--slowly--
 Walked the weary feet that night;
 Hollow echoes answer lonely
 To the feet, however light.
 Up the staircase, to the broadstair,
 Turns he sharply to the right,
 There is anguish in the still air,
 There are shapes athwart the sight.
 No, the eye has only treasured,
 Diamond-like, a hidden ray;
 And by this, the darkness measured,
 Shows it darkest ere the day.
 Was that sigh a human sighing?
 Was that groan from human heart?
 Was that sob from lips in dying?
 There's a whisper--"We depart."
 Murky thick, the blackness seemeth
 As he gropes athrough the gloom,
 Like to one, who, steeping dreameth,
 The he wakes within a tomb.
 And the baluster he holdeth
 Has a cold sepulchral damp,
 And the heavy air enfoldeth
 Gleam and gloom like dying lamp.
 There's a vapor, foetid, stealing
 Over all the shuddering sense,
 Like a charnel-house revealing
 What we are, the spirit hance.
 Sure, the darkness is appalling--
 Deeper than all midnight gloom--
 Voices, muffled, shrieking, calling,
 Such as fill a haunted room.
 Thrills the flesh beneath the fingers
 Or a dim and shadowy band,
 And a breathing faintly lingers--
 Now, a touch is on the hand.
 Now, a presence slowly gliding
 Up the stairs before his feet,
 Without footfall, stilly sliding,
 Making darkness more complete.
 Sure, the way is very darksome--
 Sure, the stillness voice hath found--
 For through all the chambers, lonesome,
 Comes a call as from the ground.
 Thus the stranger upward wending,
 Marked how deep the deepened night,
 Never knowing the wild rending
 Of a soul upon its flight.
 Unanreald, and prayerless, driven

To the Judgment seat on high--
 Unrepented sins unshriven,
 "God be merciful," the cry,
 Smothered err it left the portal
 Of the terror-stricken brain--
 Oh! The cry, so more than mortal,
 May we never hear again.
 For the blood of this our Brother,
 Cries from cut the startled earth,
 And unwilling our mother
 Taketh up the monstrous birth;
 All her children, where they languish
 In her caves and cells profound,
 Answer back the cry of anguish--
 "Human blood is on the ground."
 And it reached the deep pavilions
 Of God's everlasting throne,
 Calling forth its many millions,
 Startled at the anguish-tone.
 High archangels downward bending,
 From their crystal wall to know,
 What poor human heart is rending
 In its agonized woe.
 Gentle spirits, grief enfolding,
 Chant evangels low and sweet,
 How God's love is ever holding
 Mercy nearest to His feet;
 "God be pitiful," are chanting,
 From their dear, supernal spheres,
 With their white wings downward slanting,
 Where exhale poor human tears.
 Not alone the dear God leaves us,
 But with cheering hand and voice--
 Thus assuaging all that grieves us,
 Doubling joy when we rejoice.
 We are needful each to other,
 In the battle-field of life--
 We are needful, friend and brother,
 Household links--the husband, wife,
 We must walk with kind endeavor--
 Not alone, but linked in love,
 That God's angel-bands may never
 Fail the cherubim all the flaming,
 As of old at Eden's gate,
 In God's book out record naming,
 Round out paradise shall wait.¹

¹ The *New York Times*, "Midnight in the House of Murder," February 18, 1857, 2.

The case took an even more scandalous turn when it was revealed that one of the boarders of the house, Emma Augusta Cunningham, thought to be a widow, was in fact Mrs. Cunningham-Burdell, having married the doctor the prior October. It was quickly theorized that Mrs. Cunningham-Burdell, along with another boarder, John J. Eckel, had killed Dr. Burdell in order to inherit his wealth and property, which was rumored to be quite substantial. When Mrs. Cunningham-Burdell's trial began the May, the *Times* once again began running front page articles on the story. Complete transcripts of witness testimonies were reprinted for the reader's consideration. After less than a week of trial, Cunningham-Burdell and Eckel were both acquitted and released, it having been decided that there was not enough evidence to convict them. "The trial," wrote the paper, "has done nothing to clear up the mystery of this strange case. Many statements which were supposed, after the Coroner's inquest, to be important facts that might give some clue to the detection of the murderers, have been entirely disproved, and the question remains as unsettled as ever--who killed Dr. Harvey Burdell?"¹ In efforts to answer that question, the *Times* even offered up a five thousand dollar reward to anyone with information leading to the detection of the Burdell murder.² Unfortunately, their efforts were fruitless, and the murder remains unsolved to this day.

"The easiest way to tell the difference between a modern, informative, 'cool' journalist and his storytelling, passionate ancestor," says Barton, "is to look at their vocabularies. Modern journalism simply does not use the words 'pathos,'

¹ The *New York Times*, "News of the Day," May 11, 1857, 4.

² The *New York Times*, "Five Thousand Dollars Reward!," May 22, 1857, 4.

'heartrending,' 'melancholy,' or 'piteous,' just as religious phraseology is no longer present. *Times* reporters no longer mention the jewelry corpses wear, or describe victims as 'mangled' or 'torn to pieces.' Bodies and body parts are usually 'remains' nowadays...I think there are not only changes in etiquette; they also signal changes in feeling rules and emotion talk."³ This feeling and emotion talk that *Times* reporters employed not only allowed for more interesting reading, it connected the papers to the people in a way not often seen in present-day journalism. The reporters experienced the stories along with their readers, and these stories, however disturbing, were a connective glue between the press and the public.

³ Barton, 169. This type of emotional-writing was not only seen in journalism, but was also prevalent in the personal writings of the day. For exceptional examples, consult the correspondence and narratives of written by soldiers during the Civil War.

V. CONCLUSION

No historian of the nineteenth-century, or of the United States in general, would likely argue with the statement that the American Civil War life-altering experience for those who lived it and all those who came after it. None would also be expected argue with the assertion that the nation was frenzied over slavery and sectional issues for much of the 1850s. Much, however, does not mean all, and hopefully this study has verified that many other topics--topics most significant and pertinent to the citizens of New York City--also existed during the decade preceding the Civil War. This of course was a study of one locale and one local paper with a specific readership, and thus cannot be applied to the all classes of the public in all areas of the nation. Yet it does not seem unreasonable to assume that the same conclusion would be drawn in other cities and from other papers. The topics most highlighted by each location would likely vary, but the very fact that there were other topics is something one would expect to find anywhere.

New York City, from a historian's perspective, is luckily blessed with an abundance of sources to make a study of this nature possible. The communications boom of the 1830s was no more acute than in this city, so by the 1850s there were literally dozens of newspapers and literary magazines to consult. Among the thousands of citizens that called New York City home, several kept meticulous diaries and many more wrote scrupulous correspondence that allow for great insights into the

happenings of the city. The two sources chosen for this study--the *New York Times* and the diary of George Templeton Strong--were no exception.

The topics presented in this study are very indicative of the tone and atmosphere of the 1850s, but they are by no means the only events and issues that occurred. A study of dissertation length could easily be written on this topic with just these two primary sources and the pages would quickly be filled. Fear of epidemic diseases, city fires and building reform, attention to foreign affairs, the plight of the poor and homeless, and so on, are all topics that could be used for a study of New York in this decade and all would add to David Potter's contention that there was much more to the 1850s than sectional issues. The topics presented here, however, are the *most* indicative of the themes that demonstrate the state of this city at this time.

"Four hostile newspapers," noted Napoleon, "are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets." The power of the press has been significant throughout American history, and no more so than in this decade of study. The 1850s were a time that saw the press open up to other, non-traditional news stories that went beyond money and politics to reveal more about the city and the people than ever before. What the *New York Times* revealed about its readership in New York City in the 1850s was that of a complex and multifaceted society that cannot be so easily boiled down into the simplistic terms of the sectional crisis. Sectionalism was a complicated issue, but so were the day-to-day lives of New Yorkers in a contentious time when many different people with many different thoughts and ideas were thrown together into one environment. That the decade of the 1850s terminated in the extraordinary event of the

American Civil War may give the impression that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, yet those parts were what made up the lives of 1850s New York citizens, and as such should not fall by the wayside as inconsequential history. These events were more than consequential to those who lived them.

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