



4. Five Points, 1827

Five Points, 1827, Engraving after a painting by George Catlin. Published in D.T. Valentine's Manual, 1855. Museum of the City of New York, Print Archives, 97.227.3

Five Points is the picture of what the grid commissioners were trying to avoid. Their orderly future city of right angles is the antithesis of what developed at the notorious Five Points. Had the grid not

happened, intersections like Five Points might have sprouted up all over the island.

Five Points was the five-way junction of Orange (now Baxter), Cross (Mosco) and, from the west only, Anthony (Worth) streets. When the commissioners were at work farther north, Five Points was just beginning to emerge as a specific location, at the center of an urbanizing neighborhood to the immediate southeast of the disappearing Collect Pond. The large, once-pristine spring-fed

pond had become fouled as the city expanded toward and around it. The pond was gradually filled in through the 1810s, giving hope initially for fashionable development. But the fill was poorly drained, the polluted subterranean springs remained, and the neighborhood and its prospects promptly sagged.

By 1827 when George Catlin painted the original of this image, Five Points was already the nation's first great slum, a magnet for impoverished immigrants

and associated trades and tradesmen and women. People like 1842 tourist Charles Dickens were horrified: "Poverty, wretchedness, and vice... all that is loathsome... narrow ways diverging to the right and left, and reeking every where with dirt and filth." At the same time, broad-minded native son Walt Whitman saw "the wealth of stout poor men who will work." One man's bedlam is another man's vigor.

Five Points now marks merely a conceptual boundary between the Civic Center courthouse district and Chinatown to the east. The legendary intersection long ago lost most of its points: all that is left is Worth Street (now continuing to the east) with Baxter angling in from the north down to Worth and stopping there. Mosco, the old Cross Street, crosses nothing; it is just a single block long and severed from Worth and Baxter by a park. The once notorious Five Points is now barely a where and merely a wye. For those who saw and see the commissioners' rectilinear grid as alien and rigid, the raucous life of Five Points is a symbol of how Manhattan might have matured more organically without the grid. GK