

**"THE OLD SIXTH REMINDED
ONE OF A HOUSE IN MOURNING"**

The 1856 rioting between the Mathews and Kerrigan loyalists involved more than a personal feud and a council race. Many of the newspapers covering the fracas noted that mayoral politics was involved as well. Two factions of New York Democrats had for some time been engaged in a struggle for control of the party at the citywide level. Mayor Fernando Wood headed

one clique; the other had no single leader at this point but would eventually become identified with Tammany stalwarts such as William M. Tweed.

Wood was the most dynamic New York political figure of the 1850s. Although he was a Protestant and native-born, the dapper, charming mayor was especially beloved by the city's impoverished Irish Catholic immigrants, who appreciated his efforts to create jobs and distribute food during the severe recession winter of 1854-55. Such voters also lauded Wood's efforts to obstruct enforcement of state-imposed laws limiting the sale of alcoholic beverages. Yet despite his personal magnetism and popularity with voters, Wood's refusal to follow the dictates of Tammany's internal leadership outraged many Democrats. Whigs and Republicans soon came to despise Wood as well, fuming that his personal popularity did not diminish even as he broke promises to reform government and enforce temperance legislation. By the autumn of 1856, the city was firmly divided into pro- and anti-Wood camps. The animosity between the two sides had contributed to the Sixth Ward election rioting of 1856—Mathews's supporters were pro-Wood, Kerrigan's anti-Wood. When Mathews lost his customhouse position just weeks before the 1856 election, the *Leader* identified his "offense" as "*Wood Fever*."¹⁹

After Wood won reelection in 1856, anti-Wood Democrats combined forces with Republicans to enact a slate of legislation designed to punish the mayor. Although some of the bills passed by state lawmakers sought to reform municipal government, others enacted in the winter of 1857 were designed primarily to strip Wood of his official responsibilities and patronage power. Two of these measures caused particular consternation in Five Points. One, a "license law," raised the cost of a liquor license to levels beyond the reach of many of the neighborhood's small saloonkeepers and completely banned the sale of alcoholic beverages on Sundays. The other, the Metropolitan Police Act, was the one that had so incensed Fatty Walsh. It mandated the disbanding of the city's police department and its replacement with a force administered by a state-appointed board of commissioners rather than the mayor.

The *Irish-American* condemned the Police Act for its "partisanship, odiousness, and tyranny. . . . It virtually disfranchises the people" by taking control of municipal institutions away from the city's duly elected leaders. Even many Republicans found the legislature's actions embarrass-

ing. Diarist George Templeton Strong admitted that the legislature enacted the police bill "in order to take power out of the paws of Mayor Wood and get it into those of the other scoundrels at Albany." The Republican *Times* agreed that rather than making the police apolitical, as it ought to, the legislature had merely taken the police "from one political party and hand[ed] it over to another."²⁰

Two aspects of the new legislation especially infuriated Five Pointers. One was the sense that the new laws were part of a nativist plot against the Irish. Know Nothings had long called for liquor restrictions, and in cities where they had gained power—such as Philadelphia and Chicago—Know Nothing mayors had created natives-only police forces because they believed immigrants could not be trusted to enforce temperance laws. Know Nothings had also sought to restrict saloons because they understood that most immigrant political activity centered in neighborhood taverns. The Know Nothing movement was fading by the spring of 1857. But most Irish Catholics believed that the "Black Republicans," so-called by Democrats because of their purported obsession with the plight of African Americans, had adopted much of the nativist platform. Sixth Warders cursed the Police Act as "'a Know-Nothing and Black Republican scheme,' the design of which was to disfranchise foreign-born citizens, and oust them from all political rights."²¹

Five Pointers also believed that the act was part of a continuing conspiracy to deny the Irish their fair share of the patronage. In 1856, an Irish-American journal noted that despite Know Nothing claims that "Irish citizens get all the offices," only 10 percent of the seven hundred fifty customhouse employees in New York were natives of Ireland, and that the Irish held the lowest-paying jobs. "The cosy sinecures with large emoluments are reserved for 'those to the manor born,'" agreed the *Irish-American*. The police department was one of the few government institutions that hired the Irish in significant numbers for non-menial jobs—Sixth Ward immigrants constituted 64 percent of the district's force in 1856.

Led by Wood, many city Democrats fought the new Police Act. In the spring of 1857, when the state set up its new "Metropolitan" police department, Wood refused to disband the old "Municipal" force. For more than a month, the city witnessed the spectacle of rival police departments. Criminals sometimes escaped as members of the two squads fought for the right to make arrests. On one occasion, the two units engaged in a full-scale riot

on the steps of City Hall. The farce finally ended on July 2 when the state's highest court ruled that the disbanding of the old force was constitutional. Wood reluctantly dissolved the Municipal Police the next day. The stage was set for Fatty Walsh's riot.²²

According to the *Tribune*, "the old Sixth reminded one of a house in mourning," as word of the mayor's capitulation spread across Five Points on Friday, July 3. Reports that the Metropolitan Police Board had not appointed any Irishmen to the new force, except for the occasional Irish Republican, confirmed Five Pointers' fears, and rumors flew that "the Know Nothings & Black Republicans were coming down to burn the [Transfiguration] Catholic Church in Mott St." With the typically raucous Fourth of July celebrations about to begin, Clancy offered the Metropolitan commissioners the services of Captain Dowling and his old Sixth Ward police force free of charge over the holiday weekend, so long as the men remained under Dowling's command. The commissioners wanted the extra manpower, but only if the men took orders from the Metropolitan commanders, something Dowling and his men refused to consider. Vowing to "lick" any Metropolitan foolish enough to show his face in the district, Five Pointers braced for a bloody Fourth of July in the bloody old Sixth.²³

A "RATHER EXTRAORDINARY SIXTH WARD MUSS"

What transpired on the Fourth, not just where Walsh was involved but before, after, and elsewhere, exceeded even the most dire predictions, as the ward degenerated into what one historian has termed "the most ferocious free-for-all in the history of the city." Contemporaries agreed that the ensuing Sixth Ward riot threw the entire city into "a state of anarchy." No sooner had the clock struck midnight on the morning of the Fourth than the anticipated violence began. Shouting "Kill the G-d d—d Black Metropolitan Police s—n of a b—," a mob of Five Pointers beat and stoned a new policeman making an arrest after a street fight at the corner of Mulberry and Chatham Streets. The officer died several days later of injuries sustained in the brutal attack.²⁴

About an hour later, a large crowd of Five Pointers appeared on Chatham Street, determined "to beat all the new policemen they could find." The rowdies moved north from Chatham onto the Bowery, "hooting & cheering Fernando Wood & making very noisy demonstrations." North of

Bayard Street, the Five Pointers found Metropolitan Abraham Florentine Jr. of Mulberry Street. The mob wrestled Florentine's club from him, but before it could harm him seriously he ran up the street and ducked into the saloon at 40 Bowery, known throughout the neighborhood as headquarters of Pat Mathews and his "Bowery Boys." Though the tavern was relatively deserted, the occupants barricaded themselves in as the rioters bombarded it with rocks and bricks. Meanwhile, the mob noticed another Metropolitan attempting to slip away undetected. With seventy-five to a hundred men at his heels, the officer ran inside Henry McCloskey's "coffee and cake saloon" at 36 Bowery. According to the establishment's baker, Richard Quinn, the crowd smashed the windows and hurled missiles inside at the occupants, who returned fire "with tumblers, bottles and other things that we could seize upon." After about ten minutes, a gang of Mathews's Bowery Boys arrived to repel the assault. The rioters then retreated down Bayard into the heart of the Five Points neighborhood, giving "three cheers for Fernandy Wud" as they made their escape. The Bowery Boys did not pursue them, "not desiring to penetrate too far into the enemy's camp." The two gangs clashed once more just before dawn.²⁵

It was wholly appropriate that the rioters had vented their frustrations on Abraham Florentine, because he epitomized everything Five Pointers resented about the new force. Florentine, a thirty-year-old undertaker, was one of the very few white adult native-born citizens living on Mulberry Bend, the densely populated block bounded by Mulberry, Bayard, Baxter, and Park. In fact, until the 1855 census enumerator reached Florentine's house at 59½ Mulberry, he had not recorded a single native-born adult white male among the previous 928 residents. Florentine's selection for the Metropolitan force (albeit as a temporary officer) seemed to verify the Five Pointers' charge that the Republicans were discriminating against adopted citizens in their appointments to the new police department.

Florentine's hiring also lent credibility to the Irish charge that the new department was dominated by Know Nothings. Florentine's father, Abraham Senior, had been a leader of the anti-Catholic American-Republican party in the Sixth Ward, serving on the organization's "general executive" and finance committees in the 1840s. Abraham Junior had followed his father into the nativist political ranks. An 1854 *Herald* advertisement listing "Sixth Ward Reform Nominations" featured young Florentine as the candidate for one of the ward's three city council seats. This "reform" slate

was actually the Know Nothing ticket—the initially secretive nativist party used this ploy throughout the United States to advertise its nominees in 1854. Another Sixth Ward Know Nothing candidate for councilman in 1854, Joseph Souder, was made a Metropolitan sergeant. A large proportion of the rioters harassing the Metropolitans lived on lower Mulberry Street, and some of them undoubtedly knew of Florentine's affiliations. The sight of their nativist neighbors in Metropolitan uniforms must have both infuriated them and confirmed that the Police Act was part of a Know Nothing conspiracy to humiliate the Irish and destroy their burgeoning political power.²⁶

After so much predawn violence, the morning and afternoon of the Fourth of July were eerily quiet. But late that day, the violence recommenced. Learning that some of their Seventh Ward officers were under attack, Metropolitan commanders in the Sixth dispatched about two dozen patrolmen to assist them. The Sixth Ward policemen had remained in their barracks for most of the day, but at 5:00 p.m. they headed east from their White Street station house, planning to turn south on Baxter and then east onto Bayard, which would carry them across the Bowery to the Seventh Ward.²⁷

Meanwhile, Five Pointers were thronging the streets, escaping from their crowded tenements and enjoying the district's holiday celebrations. Just before the phalanx of Metropolitans set out from White Street toward the Seventh Ward, a fight broke out on Bayard between Baxter and Mulberry, and an enormous crowd gathered to witness the excitement. "The belligerent parties had just been separated," the *Tribune* later reported, "when the cry was heard, 'The Metropolitans are coming.'" Suddenly gripped by a combination of panic and outrage, some dashed into their tenements, while others stood their ground determined to prevent the Metropolitans from making arrests in a harmless street fight.

When the police turned into Bayard Street moments later, they were set upon by the rabid crowd. The patrolmen's attempts to create a wall of defense were hampered by "the shower of stones, bricks, oyster-shells, fragments of ironware, and in some instances whole pots and kettles" that rained down upon them from the surrounding tenement windows and rooftops. The assault had been in progress no more than a few minutes when the cry rang out that "the Bowery Boys are coming." Indeed, two hundred or so men and boys were streaming westward on Bayard in an

attempt once again to defend the police from attack. The Metropolitans dashed eastward to take cover behind the advancing Bowery Boys, who took over the fighting; the policemen continued toward the Seventh Ward. The Mulberry Boys, initially shocked at the sudden appearance of their Bowery foes, quickly regrouped and drove the Bowery Boys back to a construction site on the south side of Bayard between Mott and Elizabeth. The retreat proved fortuitous, as the Bowery Boys were able to lay in a new and superior supply of ammunition by helping themselves to the huge pile of bricks meant for construction of a new tenement. Using the brickbats as bludgeons and missiles, the Bowery Boys were able to drive their enemies back to Mott Street.²⁸

At this point, about six o'clock, thirty to forty Metropolitans arrived on the scene in the rear of the Mulberry gang's line, prompting most of the Mulberry Boys to take cover inside nearby tenements. "Again the bricks and stones were showered from the housetops and windows by the hundred," commented the *Tribune*, "many of which struck the officers, causing severe injuries." The patrolmen—many "with blood streaming over their faces"—were nevertheless able to make about a dozen arrests before they retreated back toward White Street. Once the police had abandoned the front, the full force of Mulberry Boys returned to Bayard to defend against the Bowery Boys' incursion. They managed to dislodge the enemy from the brick pile and force a retreat to Elizabeth Street.²⁹

The fight was primarily between Mathews's and Kerrigan's adherents on the one hand, and Brennan's on the other. The *Morning Express* reported that one side was composed of "the Bowery Boys, under the leadership of Pat Matthews [*sic*], a well known Custom House officer, and having headquarters at a drinking house No. 40 Bowery." The *Tribune* added that "many of the members of Hose Company No. 14 in Elizabeth street," the unit associated with Kerrigan, also "belong to the party." As used by the press, the term "Bowery Boy" now referred not to the colorful subculture that had flourished in the late 1840s and early 1850s, but primarily to the political adherents of Kerrigan and Mathews. The Bowery Boy of 1857 seems to have been more of a sporting man than a "B'hoy." Stories about the "old sports" of New York described both Mathews and Kerrigan as prominent sporting men. The image of the Bowery Boy published in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* after the riot closely resembles a typical sporting man and has little in common with the "soap-locked"

and clothes-conscious Bowery B'hoys of 1849. Yet one does find some traces of the "B'hoys" persisting in the 1857 Bowery Boys, especially the strident nationalism, which accounts in part for Kerrigan's volunteering for action in Mexico, Nicaragua, and the Civil War. Most of the 1857 "Bowery Boys" lived on Elizabeth Street and the Bowery, but many resided on the far side of the Bowery in the Tenth Ward as well.³⁰

Reporters covering the riot stated that the Bowery Boys' opponents in this struggle were members of a Five Points gang known as the "Dead Rabbits," and historians have consequently dubbed this conflict the "Dead Rabbit/Bowery Boy Riot." Yet the neighborhood residents who supposedly composed the ranks of the "Dead Rabbits" were unanimous in their insistence that no gang by that name existed. Instead, they claimed that the group the police initially referred to as the Mulberry Boys was actually the "Roach" or "Roche" Guard, a combination political/social club founded at the beginning of the 1850s in honor of prominent neighborhood saloonkeeper Walter Roche, an 1848 immigrant from County Carlow who at that point operated a popular saloon at 19 Mulberry Street. Marcus Horbelt, a twenty-one-year-old shoemaker residing at 25 Mulberry Street, wrote angrily after the riot to all the major New York dailies to complain about their pejorative depictions of the Roche Guard or "Dead Rabbit Club" as "a gang of Thieves, Five-Pointers, Pickpockets, &c. Now, if your reporter wished to earn \$25, I hereby offer to give him, or any other one, that sum of money who will prove, satisfactorily, that a single member of the Guard (by the way, there *is* no such club as the Dead Rabbits) is a Five-Pointer, a thief or a pickpocket. . . . I say that the young men who compose that Guard are, 1st, honest; 2d, industrious; 3d, young men who follow some lawful occupation for a living." And another Five Pointer, Harry Molony, informed the *Herald* that a club called "the 'Dead Rabbits' . . . does not nor never did belong to the Sixth ward, to the personal knowledge of one resident in it for twelve years."³¹

The press nonetheless persisted in referring to the Bowery Boys' adversaries as the "Dead Rabbits." Some reporters stated that the Dead Rabbits were an offshoot of the Roche Guard. Divisions within the Roche Guard's ranks, they said, had led to a secession of some members, who to spite their former allies threw a dead rabbit into one of their meetings, thus earning the secessionists their gruesome nickname. In fact, the most likely source of the term lies elsewhere. One eyewitness to the riot, Metropolitan



A "DEAD RABBIT," SKETCHED FROM LIFE.

Frank Leslie's depiction of a typical Roche Guard supporter. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, (July 11, 1857). Collection of the Library of Congress.

Thomas Harvey, later testified that "the thieves of the Five Points" were referred to in neighborhood slang as "the 'dead Rabbit party.'" In an attempt to cast aspersion on their antagonists, the Bowery Boys probably referred to their opponents by this name during the struggle (Horbelt's letter demonstrates that he and his allies were very sensitive about being associated with the criminals who concentrated at the Five Points intersection). Because most reporters used the Bowery Boys as sources for their stories on the riots, the scribes probably got the term from them. The

name so captured the imagination of New Yorkers that the press continued to use it despite the abundant evidence that no such club or gang existed. The *Morning Express*, for example, initially reported that mourners at one rioter's funeral wore satin badges inscribed with the words "Dead Rabbit Club," but the next day admitted that they had actually read "Roach Guard. We mourn our loss." For more than a decade, "Dead Rabbit" became the standard phrase by which city residents described any scandalously riotous individual or group. But there seems to be no justification for referring to the Bowery Boys' adversaries by this name.³²

While the origin of the term "Dead Rabbit" is uncertain, it is clear that the Five Pointers referred to by that name were all loyal adherents of Matthew Brennan. When Brennan became police justice in 1854, he put Roche in charge of his Monroe Hall saloon. Roche also served as assistant foreman of Brennan Hose Company No. 60 in 1858. Horbelt was a member



SCENE AT THE FIVE POINTS RIOT. WOMEN AND MEN THROWING BRICKBATS DOWN ON THE POLICE.

Five Points women helped defend the neighborhood against the incursions of the police and the Bowery Boys. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (July 11, 1857). Collection of the Library of Congress.

of the same fire company. He was also appointed an election inspector for the lower Mulberry Street district for the November 1857 canvass (the polling place was in Roche's saloon there) and was elected a ward constable in that contest—honors he could not have achieved without Brennan's approval. The extent to which Roche or Horbelt participated in the actual rioting cannot be determined, though we do know that Fatty Walsh, one leader of the rioters, was affiliated with Brennan as well. The riot was clearly a political fight between the adherents of Brennan on the one hand, and those of Mathews and Kerrigan on the other.³³

Despite the political overtones of the fighting, men were not the only participants. Women and children allied with the Roche Guard were "busily engaged in gathering and breaking up stones, brickbats, &c., in their aprons and handkerchiefs . . . and carrying them to those on the housetops to fire down on the crowd." By late afternoon, in order to protect themselves from the continuing rain of rocks, bottles, and bricks, the Bowery Boys at the corner of Elizabeth and Bayard erected a barricade from carts, wagons, and construction materials left on the street. Their adversaries soon followed suit.³⁴

In order to penetrate these defensive fortifications, the rioters around



View from the "Dead Rabbit" barricade on Bayard Street, at the corner of either Mulberry or Mott. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (July 11, 1857). Collection of the Library of Congress.

6:00 p.m. began to take up firearms for the first time, though the Bowery Boys had far more pistols and rifles than did the Roche Guard. "A frightful scene of riot and bloodshed ensued," reported the *Morning Express*. "A large number were wounded, and some mortally." According to the *Herald*, the scene became one "of indescribable confusion. The crowding, fighting mass in the streets—the howling, shrieking women and children in the upper floors busily engaged in showering every description of missile on the heads of those below, hitting indiscriminately friends and foes—the explosion of firearms, amid the shrieks of the wounded and dying, rendered the scene one of horror and terror."³⁵

By this point, people from all over the city had flocked to the Sixth Ward to witness the riot. Minister Lyman Abbott rented a room on an upper floor of a boardinghouse at the corner of Bayard and the Bowery in order to observe the spectacle. Richard Henry Dana Jr., who since his visits to Five Points brothels had published *Two Years Before the Mast*, was also there. When he asked who was engaged in the battle, an onlooker told Dana that the struggle was "between our chaps & the Bowery boys." Dana noted in his diary that "the fight was chiefly with fire-arms, tho' there were occasional rushes & retreats, assaults and repulses of large bodies, armed with bricks & clubs, & here & there a strong man made long bowls with pieces of brick. On the side walk not far from me, was a pool of blood, as if a hog had been killed, & a lad of 16 came out of a house with a bandage over his face, & a long-nine [cigar] in his mouth, swaggering off with the air of a hero." Observing the conflict was almost as dangerous as participating in it. A stray bullet struck and killed a young spectator at a Bayard Street window near Abbott's.³⁶

Despite the escalating casualty rate, the Roche Guard and its allies fought on in defense of their turf. "The recklessness of some of the men seemed almost unaccountable," exclaimed the *Tribune*. "One of the Dead Rabbits stood for [a] full fifteen minutes on the top of the brick pile throwing bricks at the Bowery boys, while at the same time the bullets were whistling by in a fearfully ominous manner. . . . A woman displayed remarkable bravery at this time" as well. "Several times she came out of Mott street to the brick pile, filled her apron with bricks and carried them into Mott street." Bowery Boys called on her to stop but when she returned for more, they threw bricks at her. When she came back yet again, they shot at her. She only stopped when a man "came out and carried her

forcibly into Mott street." After the shooting tapered off momentarily around seven o'clock, Isaiah Rynders made an effort to broker a truce. Both sides jeered the Captain, however, "and seeing a boy shot down beside him, he acted the wiser part and retired."³⁷

The riot finally ended around eight o'clock. According to most press accounts, a former policeman from the Nineteenth Ward named Shangles convinced each side to cease and desist by telling them (inaccurately) that the militia was on its way to restore order. Clancy later insisted, however, that he, Dowling, and Brennan had persuaded the rioters to go home. Whatever the case, "each faction then slowly dispersed—the Atlantic Boys to the Bowery and the 'Dead Rabbits' to their haunts in Mulberry and the streets in the lower part of the Ward."³⁸

As news of the cease-fire spread, Five Pointers swarmed out of neighborhood tenements and into district pharmacies—the de facto medical clinics of the day—to see if their loved ones were among the dead or wounded. "So great was the anxiety to obtain this information," reported the *Times*, "that the windows of several of the drug stores were broken and the doors forced. Women and children rushed forward frantically for their husbands, fathers, and brothers, and their cries and lamentations made this the gloomiest portion of the day." Twelve New Yorkers lay dead. Thirty-seven of the wounded were admitted to New York Hospital, but the *Times* estimated that two or three times that number were treated in their homes out of fear the authorities might prosecute the injured for their part in what a number of newspapers called the Sixth Ward's "civil war." "The greatest injury was done . . . to the Mulberry-street 'crowd,' as they were not so well armed as their Bowery antagonists," noted the *Times*. "Not one of the Bowery boys was fatally injured," concurred the *Tribune*, ". . . nearly all of the killed being of the Dead Rabbit crowd."³⁹

Despite having inflicted the overwhelming majority of the serious injuries, the Bowery Boys were not the ones prosecuted for rioting. Authorities may have justified this bias on the grounds that the Bowery Boys initially had entered the fray in defense of the police. Prosecutors indicted only the six men arrested by the Metropolitans when the new police made their second foray into Bayard Street during the initial stages of the riot. Police had observed them throwing bricks into the crowd or attacking officers attempting to make arrests.

None of the men indicted for rioting hired an attorney and all presented

the same defense: that they had merely been watching or passing by when apprehended. Barney Gallagher, a tailor who like all his codefendants could not sign his name to his statement, told the court that "I'm a poor man and han't had money to fee a lawyer nor anybody else. I was going through the street peaceably to my family with my little week's earnings, and didn't do nothin to nobody." Only Clancy appeared on behalf of the defendants, peppering the prosecution witnesses with questions in an attempt to poke holes in their cases. The New York press condemned the aldermen for taking the side of the riot's instigators, but Clancy insisted to the *Times* that he acted "from motives of charity, only, to help those men who were without friends." The alderman's efforts were in vain, however, as the judge found all the defendants guilty. Clancy did win a suspended sentence for a sixteen-year-old rioter, but the remaining five received the maximum permissible punishment—six months in prison. New York's Irish-American community perceived the verdicts and sentences as evidence of both selective prosecution and prejudice. "The principle evidence against some of those who have been sentenced to six months' imprisonment and hard labor was, that they had unmistakably Irish names," complained the *New York Citizen*, "and happened to be in the street, and perhaps wounded while the riots were going on!" Those responsible for the deaths of the Roche Guard members and its allies, in contrast, went unpunished.⁴⁰

The Bowery Boy Riot still ranks as one of the deadliest episodes of civil unrest in the history of New York. To that point, only the Astor Place Riot of 1849 had resulted in more loss of life, and in that case most of the twenty fatalities had come when the military fired upon the crowd surrounding the opera house there. Never before the events of 1857 had New York civilians taken the lives of so many of their fellows.⁴¹

Many historians, including Mike Wallace and Edwin G. Burrows in *Gotham*, have portrayed the riot as one between nativists and the Irish. Given that the Bowery Boys aided the Metropolitans, and that most Five Pointers perceived the new police as part of a Know Nothing conspiracy against them, this interpretation has seemed perfectly plausible. Yet an examination of both the contemporary evidence and the subsequent careers of the Bowery Boy leaders suggests otherwise. No contemporary observer portrayed the conflict as a struggle between nativists and Irish Catholics. Mathews was a native of Ireland, and although his religious affiliation (if any) is not known, his given name Patrick and that of his sister Mary sug-

gest a Catholic background. Kerrigan was a native New Yorker, but must also have been at least a nominal Catholic, having attended a Catholic university. His later career also indicates a devotion to Irish independence incompatible with significant anti-Catholicism. In 1866, Kerrigan raised a brigade for the invasion of Canada organized by the Irish freedom fighters known as the Fenians. A year later, he served as "brigadier general" for a force of thirty-eight men that sailed to Ireland with a shipload of weapons in the hopes of fomenting an uprising against the British.⁴²

Recognizing the riot as an intraethnic rather than an interethnic battle, the Irish-American *Citizen* condemned the rioters as an embarrassment to Irishmen everywhere. It is "idle to deny that a portion of the Irish working classes are far too ready, when intoxicated, to engage in a row." Of all the evils associated with Irish drunkenness, the editor asserted, "the faction fights at home and abroad are undoubtedly the most to be regretted. . . . Riots are bad under any circumstances; but they are peculiarly detestable when got up by compatriots against each other in a foreign land. Thus Irishmen come to this free country to improve their condition; and because one party came from a different province [from] another, or perhaps only from a different county they attack each other like tigers whenever they get together and drink." Yet the Five Points riot was not a "faction fight" in the strictest sense of the term—a battle inspired by Irish regional pride. Although the Roche Guard drew an especially large proportion of its recruits from lower Mulberry Street, a stronghold of immigrants from County Cork in southern Ireland, its hero Brennan traced his roots to County Donegal in the far north.⁴³

The real cause of the riot was not regionalism in Ireland so much as politics in New York, mixed with a good old-fashioned local turf battle. The *Herald* rightly attributed the hostilities to a long-standing feud between Five Points political factions. "The whole thing was an ordinary, or rather extraordinary Sixth ward muss," the *Herald* concluded, "rendered more disastrous by the appearance of the police force, against which the residents of that locality have an undoubtedly strong prejudice."⁴⁴

The reason why Mathews, a prominent Wood supporter, would defend the Metropolitans alongside Kerrigan's men, well-known adversaries of the mayor, is that in the world of Five Points politics, defending one's turf trumped consistency on a controversial issue such as the Police Act. Mathews and Kerrigan might adhere to different factions within Tammany, but

could unite in their determination to defend their territory against an incursion by Brennan's followers—even if that encroachment was for the harassment of the Metropolitans, something Mathews ought to have condoned. Kerrigan himself told the *Tribune* that the riot started because in their pursuit of the police to the Bowery, "the Dead Rabbits were on forbidden ground, the Bowery Boys claiming exclusive control over that part of the Ward." More than just the bragging rights over certain neighborhood blocks inspired this territorial jealousy. Brennan's followers realized, according to one riot witness, that "if they could lick the Bowery men they would have all of the 6th ward." This ongoing battle to stave off absorption into Brennan's sphere of influence helps explain why Mathews would aid the Metropolitans in their struggle with Brennan's supporters.⁴⁵

Dana recorded in his journal that "one of the more respectable Irishmen" present at the uprising told him the riot had started because "the New police could not go into the 6th Ward,—that the men of the 6th Ward had vowed to kill them all, if they came there." When Dana reminded the Five Pointer that the police were backed by the authority of the entire state, he replied that "'the Sixth Ward, Sir, is the strongest power on earth.' He repeated this, & fully believed it. Nor is it strange that he should. It has given the great[est] Democratic Majority every year," and as a result its inhabitants "have enjoyed almost an impunity in their violences & wickedness." The result was one of the bloodiest riots in the city's violent history.⁴⁶