

“Babel” and from the efforts of this “motley collection” would emerge America’s premier city.

By the time of Independence a broad tolerance had developed. During the Revolutionary era the Anglican Church was disestablished and all creeds, including the Roman Catholic, were accorded full freedom of worship. Catholics had not been welcomed in most English colonies, and, other than during the Dongan administration, New York was no exception. Few Catholics lived in New York City prior to the Revolution, and those who did could not worship publicly. However, by 1776 Ferdinand Steinmeyer, a Jesuit Father, journeyed frequently from Maryland to help Catholics celebrate mass in their homes, and a few years later, in 1785, the first Roman Catholic parish was founded.¹³⁰

Toleration did not come immediately to all who landed in Manhattan over the nearly two centuries of colonial history. But it is striking how short-lived and relatively mild was the intolerance leveled at such groups as Quakers, Lutherans, and Jews. Equally striking was the relative ease and rapidity with which acculturation occurred. As noted, New York’s climate of interethnic harmony was surely promoted by the fact that it contributed to economic wellbeing as well as made for sound colonial policy. Also likely helpful was the fact that, though representatives of “all the nations under heaven” came to dwell there, they arrived in rather small numbers—a handful of Jews, a few hundred Huguenots. Yet within a few decades after the new nation was established, Manhattan’s shores were to be buffeted by massive waves of immigrants different in language and religion from the majority of the city’s residents. Then New York’s reputation for toleration and adaptability would be tested as never before.

*Dynamic
Growth
and
Diversity:
The City
and Its
People,
1789–1880*

Postwar New York was first confronted with the problem of assimilating newcomers during the 1790s, when its population jumped from 33,131 to 60,489.¹ Immigration along with natural population growth and a sizeable influx of people from rural New York and from out-of-state accounted for this spurt. Of the sending nations Britain—particularly its Irish counties—France, and the German states led the way. The successful culmination of the American Revolution as well as the potential for economic improvement served to inspire downtrodden Irish, who constituted the largest immigrant group during the first ten years of peace. After a decline beginning in 1794, the failed 1798 Irish rebellion once more sent boatloads of refugees from Erin to New York.²

Rebellions also contributed to the increase in New York's French population. The vicissitudes of the French Revolution encouraged both republicans and monarchists at various times to seek refuge on Manhattan island. The slave revolt in France's Santo Domingo colony beginning in 1793 added an estimated 4,000 refugees to the city's population. While most of these newcomers established permanent residence, a number sought temporary refuge and would eventually return to France. Among the latter were a few who went on to achieve considerable notoriety, including Louis Philippe, Francois Rene Viscount de Chateaubriand, and Charles Maurice de Talleyrand. One sign of the vitality of New York's French community during the decade was the appearance of numerous advertisements in French in the city's newspapers. In 1795 French exiles established a bilingual newspaper, the *French and American Gazette*, which lasted one year before being transformed into the monolingual *Gazette Française*. This journal was published for three years before it was forced to give up the ghost.³ The French immigrants failed to form a vital ethnic community, and they generally assimilated into the larger white society. One of their number, John Dubois, would become the city's Catholic bishop in 1826.⁴

Among the newer members of New York's German community were a few veterans of the mercenary force employed by the British during the American Revolution.⁵ They were soon joined by immigrants from the Fatherland, several of whom possessed the craft skills for which Germany was noted. An item in the *New York Gazette* of January 20, 1797, noted that many also arrived carrying a burden of debt: "40 German Redemptioners, Just arrived in the ship *Minerva* . . . from Hamburg, consisting of carpenters, joiners, blacksmiths, and bricklayers, etc. . . . Their times to be disposed of. For further particulars, enquire of the captain on board."⁶

A pattern of earlier immigrants coming to the assistance of recently arrived countrymen was visible by the first full decade of American independence. For example, the Friendly Sons of Saint Patrick, a society initially formed during the colonial period and revived in 1784, aided Irish immigrants. In 1785 German-born residents of the city had founded and taken steps to incorporate a German Society "for encouraging emigration from Germany; relieving the distress of emigrants, and promoting useful knowledge among their countrymen."⁷

As in the past members of the established community did not always welcome the newcomers. The application for incorporation by the German Society, while approved by the legislature, was vetoed by the state Council of Revision on the ground that such action would encourage other ethnic groups to establish similar societies. Such a consequence the council deemed "productive of the most fatal evils to the state" for it would bring to our shores hordes of immigrants who were "ignorant of our Constitution, and totally unacquainted with the principles of civil liberties."⁸

Religious and political prejudices affected how New Yorkers responded to natives of Ireland and France. During the late nineties, the years of the undeclared naval war with France and the Alien and Sedition acts, Federalists in particular looked askance at French republicans and Irish political refugees residing in New York City. Thus, for example, in 1798 bookseller and printer Hugh Gaine wrote in his journal, "too many United Irishmen arrived here within a few days," and a letter to the *Commercial Advertiser* warned against "the commodious instrument of the agents of France."⁹

On the other side of the ledger, when the political climate was less hysterical, New Yorkers proved they could be quite charitable toward newcomers in difficulty. Such was the case when city residents raised thousands of dollars in support of needy refugees from Santo Domingo and opened a hospital facility on Vesey Street to care for their sick. Such was also the case in 1794, when prominent citizens organized the New York Society for the Information and Assistance of Persons Emigrating from Foreign Countries. Finally, it should be noted that the German Society, acting as an unincorporated body after being rebuffed by the Council of Revision, was at last awarded a charter by the state in 1804.¹⁰

Hostility toward political refugees subsided with the end of the undeclared war with France. Congress allowed the Alien and Sedition laws to lapse after 1800, and New Yorkers turned their attention to domestic affairs. At the outset of the nineteenth century there were indicators aplenty of the kind of city New York would be in the years ahead. The multiethnic makeup of its citizenry had been firmly established during the colonial period, and there was no reason to believe that this would be reversed. The city's commitment to commercial enterprise was also unquestioned. By 1810 it had overtaken its chief

competitor, Philadelphia, and led the nation in both population and the value of its imports and exports.¹¹ The wars in Europe had been a boon to New York shipping interests, a boon stalled by the Embargo Act of 1807, ended by the War of 1812, but resumed once again when peace returned in 1815.¹² New York's favored geography and the initiative and daring of its business leaders extended the city's primacy over Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. Taking the lead in developing and employing steamboats and in instituting regularly scheduled packet service to England, New York merchants came to dominate both coastal and oceanic shipping, and the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 established the city as the principal center of trade with the nation's interior.¹³

While commerce held sway over the economic life of the city in these years, manufacturing was rapidly rising in significance. During the first quarter of the century artisans dominated trade from their small shops, yet by the late 1820s a shift from shop to factory, from small scale to large scale manufacturing was already in evidence in such fields as shipbuilding, sugar refining, and musical instrument production. The establishment of George Opdyke's ready-to-wear clothing factory in 1832 was an important step in the development of what was to become New York's major industry, employing nearly 30,000 people by mid-century.¹⁴ By 1860, not only was New York the leading garment center, it also was home to almost one-third of the nation's printers and publishers. Machine and engine manufacturing joined the list of important larger industries, and light industries produced everything from soap to cigars, furniture to billiard cues. That year there were thirty-three firms devoted exclusively to producing pianos.¹⁵

The spectacular growth of industry and particularly of commerce contributed to New York City's emergence as the financial center of the nation. Foreign and domestic trade brought a need for banks, insurance companies, auction houses, and a permanent stock exchange. By the century's fourth decade Wall Street had become the center of the city's financial district, described by an English visitor in 1838 as the most "concentrated focus of commercial transactions in the world. . . . The whole money-dealing of New York is here brought into a very narrow compass of ground, and is consequently transacted with peculiar quickness and facility."¹⁶ From Wall Street, as one historian has aptly put it, New York's mercantile leaders with "the backing of British cap-

ital . . . were able to provide the credit and loans on which American domestic trade and economic development came increasingly to depend."¹⁷

New York's success acted as a magnet that drew in people from within and without the United States.¹⁸ Until 1820 the leading roles in the city's mercantile affairs had been played primarily by descendants of the original English and Huguenot settlers, with the Dutch tending to seek their fortunes in real estate. During the 1820s, however, these old "Knickerbocker" families were overwhelmed by an influx of New Englanders from Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New Bedford, Nantucket, and Cape Cod in Massachusetts. Names like Tappan, Macy, Grinnell, Fish, Dodge, Phelps, King, and Whitney dominated New York's financial and mercantile houses, shipping firms, and shipbuilding industry into the late years of the century.¹⁹ These sons of New England's Puritans altered the very tone of New York's business life. Unlike the more "laid back" longstanding residents, these newcomers were, as one contemporary described them, "more conservative in character, more grave in temperament, and at the same time, more enterprising, and more insistent in action."²⁰

"Enterprising" and "insistent in action" are terms that could well describe many of the European business people attracted to an expanding New York. Many arrived with modest resources, but almost all were intent upon settling permanently in the United States and making their fortunes. Among the most successful of these entrepreneurs were merchant princes John Jacob Astor from Germany, Scotsmen Archibald Gracie and Robert Lenox, and Alexander T. Stewart from Ulster. Others came as representatives of European financial and manufacturing houses, often staying on to become permanent residents and citizens. Perhaps the most well known today is August Belmont, who arrived in New York representing the House of Rothschild, married into the Perry family of naval fame, and ultimately established himself as one of the city's premier financiers.²¹

Included among the nations of origin of New York's foreign-born merchant leaders were France and France's lost Santo Domingo possession, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Spain. But, as the city's principal sister-in-trade-and-finance was Liverpool, it is not surprising that the British constituted the largest grouping of foreign businessmen.

These newcomers to the city played a significant role in business, but

their numbers were not large enough to quantitatively affect the ethnic character of the metropolis. As late as 1835 only 10.2 percent of the city's population of 207,089 was foreign born. Yet, by 1860 47 percent of its 813,669 residents had been born abroad.²² The story behind that change, the story of mass migration, introduces the real drama of New York's ethnic history during the nineteenth century.

The years between roughly 1815 and 1880 have traditionally been labeled the era of the "Old Immigration," with most of the newcomers arriving from northern and western Europe. Hundreds of thousands of Irish and Germans as well as lesser numbers of English, Scots, Welsh, French, Swiss, Scandinavians, Dutch, and Belgians came to New York in the decades preceding and immediately following the Civil War. However, in the nation's premier port at mid-century an English visitor was able to find representatives of numerous other countries walking its streets, "in short, a few of all the nations upon the earth."²³

Although the "Old Immigration" lasted nearly sixty-five years, it varied yearly in size and ethnic makeup of the immigrant groups. Readjustments and downturns in the economies of Europe fostered emigration, while similar crises in the United States could temporarily retard the process.²⁴ Religious and political persecution acted to spur emigration as did dramatic spurts in population growth. On both sides of the Atlantic wars discouraged and the return of peace encouraged migration.

Historian Richard B. Stott offers a useful summary of the general background and motives of the immigrants arriving in New York City during the antebellum years. He points out that they were young (50 percent between the ages of fifteen and thirty), the majority were male (though the percentage of females steadily increased, rising from 23 percent of the total during the five year period 1821–1825 to 43 percent during the years 1855–1860) and rural (people who, "though poor by American standards, were from the middling ranks of the peasantry"). However, as Stott states, "artisans were overrepresented among immigrants choosing to remain in New York City."²⁵

In some cases religion was the main reason for emigration. Intolerance drove members of minority sects to seek the freer religious atmosphere to be found in the United States, among them Prussian "Old Lutherans," Jews from Bavaria and Wurtemberg, Swiss Methodists and Baptists, Norwegian Quakers, and Swedish Jansonites. The political cli-

mate also contributed its share of emigres, with the arrival of Germans, Poles, Hungarians, and Italians—leaders of, and participants in the failed uprisings of the 1830s and 1848 in behalf of republican government and/or national liberation. Probably more numerous than these idealists were the young men who escaped to America in order to avoid compulsory military service in the armies of rulers they had no role in choosing.²⁶

For the vast majority of emigrants, however, it was economic causes that led them to choose a new beginning in America. Subsistence farmers were driven off the land by landlords seeking more efficient and profitable use of their holdings or by devastating crop failures, most notable of all the potato blight of the mid 1840s which victimized hundreds of thousands of Irish and German families. The process of industrialization, ever more efficient machinery and larger factories, cost numerous urban craftsmen and rural weavers their livelihoods. Exacerbating these conditions was a dramatic rise in population throughout the British Isles and in most of continental Europe during these years.²⁷

Though the mostly young men who undertook the journey to America certainly came with hopes of improving their lot, in most cases neither the decision to leave home nor the goal of economic well-being were matters involving the emigrants alone. In their native lands they were participants in a family-based agrarian economy. Stott points out that "often the decision to emigrate was made not solely by the individual but as part of a *family* decision."²⁸ And the *family's* welfare was the prime consideration determining the outcome of the discussions. Testifying to this process were the millions of hard-earned dollars sent back home from America by the immigrants to help their families get by as well as to provide passage for others to emigrate.²⁹

From Liverpool, from Havre, London, Bremen, and Hamburg they sailed to the United States; of the 5,457,914 who arrived between 1820 and 1860, fully two-thirds, 3,742,532, debarked in New York City.³⁰ The flood halted temporarily during the Civil War, but afterwards numbers rose again with the same ratio arriving through New York City. In the early years of the century the emigrant could not be certain of the availability of space, sailing dates, or cost of the voyage and so worked out individual arrangements for passage. However, establishment of regularly scheduled packet service soon ended this practice,

and commercial houses on both sides of the Atlantic, recognizing that profits could accrue from human baggage, brought system and order to the emigration process beginning in the late 1820s. These firms contracted for ship's space and set rates for passage. Some even established their own passenger lines, engaged in propaganda to encourage emigration, and offered assistance in transmitting passage money from immigrants in America to their families back home. Advances in marine technology also contributed to easing the difficult journey. Beginning in the late 1850s steamships entered the immigrant carrying trade, cutting voyage time from six to eight weeks down to less than two by the 1880s.³¹

Improved services could only make a most difficult experience a bit less onerous. The twenty to sixty dollars a steerage ticket cost during this period usually got one across the ocean but rarely without major trauma. Passengers were subjected to the possibility of seasickness, overcrowding, dirt, hunger, stench, disease, and even death brought on by shipwreck, typhus, cholera, smallpox, or malnutrition. The mortality rate aboard immigrant ships, however, is estimated to have averaged about two percent or less except during epidemic years, when it rose precipitously (c. 10 percent in 1817–18 and 1831–34; c. 20 percent in 1847).³²

Finally sailing through the Narrows and into New York's harbor was undoubtedly a heartening experience for the immigrants. However, particularly during the first decades of this period, the arrival could prove as harrowing as the journey. Prior to 1882, when the federal government took control, processing immigrants through the port of New York fell under the jurisdiction of state and city governments, which until 1847 did very little to accommodate the newcomers. Those with communicable diseases were sent into quarantine at the marine hospital on Staten Island. Others, who were sick or became ill soon after arriving, had to make their own way to the city's almshouses or public or private hospital charity wards. Even a sound body and coins in one's pocket were not sufficient to provide a pleasant transition from ship to shore. After facing the medical officers, they encountered the "runners," agents of boardinghouse operators and of companies that specialized in transporting immigrants by boat or rail to the interior. These runners usually were of the same nationality and spoke the same language as the immigrants they greeted. Their goal was to win the migrants' trust,

often misinform them regarding employment opportunities in or beyond the city, and then proceed to bilk them of as much cash and/or property as possible in return for overpriced travel tickets, baggage transport at exorbitant rates, and boardinghouse accommodations at highly unfair rents.³³

To mitigate these conditions became a goal of such organizations as the German Society, Irish Emigrant Society, St. George's Society (English), and St. Andrew's Society (Scottish). High on their agenda was encouraging immigrants to migrate out of the city, an endeavor that met with only limited success. But their lobbying efforts to have the state play a more active and productive role in the immigration process bore fruit in 1847. That year the legislature in Albany passed a bill establishing the Board of Commissioners of Emigration. The members of the board, all serving without pay, consisted of six gubernatorial appointees, the mayors of New York and Brooklyn, and the presidents of the German Society and the Irish Emigrant Society. They were given both the power and the funds to inspect incoming ships and provide aid, information, and employment assistance to the immigrants. In addition to the marine hospital at Staten Island, which continued to treat contagious cases, a new facility was established on Ward's Island at Hell Gate to serve immigrants as a hospital, dispensary, and place of refuge for the infirm. A state law enacted in 1848 regulated boardinghouse rates and practices.

The serious problem of runners remained, however. With immigrants disembarking at several different piers, it was impossible to keep these extortionists at bay. To thwart this, in 1855 the Board of Commissioners of Emigration designated Castle Garden as the central landing station for all immigrants. Located at the Battery at the foot of Manhattan, this former fort, former amusement hall, and recent aquarium served as immigrant entrepot until replaced by Ellis Island in the 1890s. Here newcomers received aid, advice, and services from honest brokers and agents, city employees, and representatives of the various immigrant aid societies.³⁴

With more than two thirds of the immigrants arriving in the United States after 1820 debarking in New York, the city's foreign-born population steadily rose. In the single decade of the 1850s over two million immigrants landed in Manhattan. But, even though New York's Irish and German populations had grown immensely, the fact remains

that by 1860 the city held but 9 percent of the nation's immigrant Germans and a bit over 12 percent of its Irish.³⁵ Who did stay in the city? Edward K. Spann provides a concise but accurate answer, "the ablest and most ambitious on the one hand and the poorest and most unwanted on the other."³⁶

Responding to rapid population and economic growth, the boundary of the city's settled area pushed ever northward. In 1815 it had extended but two miles from the island's tip at the Battery, yet ten years later the city limits had reached 14th Street. By 1865, paved and graded streets reached to 42nd Street, while housing was already available in sections of the east fifties. Beyond that frontier line were found the suburban Manhattan villages of Harlem, Bloomingdale (what is now the Upper West Side), and Yorkville (now the east eighties). During the 1830s and 40s more and more of the buildings in lower Manhattan were converted to commercial use as residents moved uptown or to Brooklyn. So was born the commute to work, a journey made possible by advances in mass transportation. First came twelve-passenger omnibuses, followed by horse-drawn railways which more than doubled the carrying capacity. In 1832 the New York and Harlem Railroad was inaugurated with service from Prince Street to 14th. By 1838 the line extended all the way north to Harlem.³⁷

Lower Manhattan as an area of residence was left to the thousands of immigrants pouring into the city. Lacking the funds to pay for uptown housing and the costs of daily transportation to work, they had to live within walking distance of their jobs at the East River docks, shipyards, and warehouses or the inland shops, factories, and commercial houses. To accommodate these people and to reap the huge profits stemming from ever-rising land values and skyrocketing rents, existing single family homes were converted into multiple dwelling apartments housing three or four families.³⁸ A city inspector's report in 1834 found "many mercenary landlords who only contrive in what manner they can stow the greatest number of human beings in the smallest space."³⁹ By the mid-forties a more "efficient" style of multifamily dwelling made its appearance in the city and rapidly replaced the converted apartments. This was the tenement, which would provide housing for most immigrants. By 1864 the Council on Hygiene reported that there were already 495,592 people living in 15,309 tenements in New York City, and their numbers continued to grow after that.⁴⁰

Tenements came in a variety of sizes, but most were dreadfully cramped with "300–400 square feet of floor space and two to four rooms."⁴¹ A report by the Council on Hygiene described a typical midcentury tenement as "a structure of rough brick, standing on a lot twenty five by one hundred feet; it is from four to six stories high, and is so divided internally as to contain four families on each floor—each family eating, drinking, sleeping, cooking, washing and fighting in a room eight feet by ten, and a bedroom six feet by ten."⁴² Though indoor plumbing, central heating, and gaslight had begun to appear in better housing as early as the 1840s, not until the 1860s could tenement dwellers expect the luxury of one water spigot per floor, and that was only in the newest structures. Prior to the 1860s, and long after for most tenement dwellers, water had to be carried up from street pumps or from wells located in the yards close by the outdoor privies. Beginning in 1852 a popular philanthropic endeavor was to establish public bath houses in the congested immigrant districts of the city. The first of these was the People's Washing and Bathing Establishment on Mott Street.⁴³

Tenement rental charges depended on the amount of light and ventilation available. Apartments with windows could rent for as much as thirteen dollars a month, while single rooms in the dark interior of the building could be had for as little as seventy-five cents a week. Most primitive of all tenement accommodations were the cellar apartments, where in 1850 more than 29,000 newcomers to America dwelt.⁴⁴

Investigations of tenement house conditions by city and state bodies, the private Citizens' Association of New York, and the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (AICP) documented appalling conditions and called for reform legislation. Then as now, however, a good number of concerned citizens believed that poverty was a consequence of character deficiency, and they were wary of assisting those considered undeserving.⁴⁵ Reform-minded religious women, for example, set up missions in the emerging immigrant slums to teach the poor proper work habits and inculcate them with Protestant moral values.⁴⁶

At the same time, the more active AICP and the enlightened Council on Hygiene understood that overcrowded tenements also contributed to destitution. Such crowding, declared the AICP "breaks down the barriers of self-respect, and prepares the way for direct proflig-

gacy.”⁴⁷ Their efforts to aid the poor immigrants led to the enactment of the Tenement House Law of 1867, a measure with low standards but one that did represent a first step toward housing reform. The city enacted subsequent laws in 1879, 1887, and 1895, but no truly effective legislation appeared prior to 1901.⁴⁸

Housing reform was not the only program pushed by native New Yorkers who were beginning to see the environmental roots of poverty. Charles Loring Brace and his followers in the Children’s Aid Society focused on the growing number of homeless children, called “street arabs.” Brace believed their numbers would grow because “immigration is pouring in its multitudes of poor foreigners.” These children, if not helped he insisted, “will soon form the great lower class . . . (and) poison society all round them.”⁴⁹ From the 1850s until the program’s demise in the 1890s, the Children’s Aid Society placed thousands of such children in homes in the West, where it was hoped they would receive proper moral training.⁵⁰

Catholics were convinced that Brace’s Children’s Aid Society was sending Catholic children to homes where they would be converted to Protestantism. To ensure that Catholic children be placed in Catholic homes, the Catholic Protectory of New York was organized in 1863. While its plans for placement failed, the New York Foundling Hospital, established six years later by the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, took up the task of child placement. Under the leadership of Sister Irene Fitzgibbon, the Hospital sent thousands of New York City children to new homes in the West.⁵¹

These reforms, unfortunately, had little impact upon the poverty of tenement life. During the 1840s in the heavily Irish Fourth and Sixth wards almost 45,000 people were packed into a quarter of a square mile with enough room for one person per 140 square feet. By 1860 commercial development in the Fourth Ward had reduced the amount of residential space by a third, while the total population remained about as it had been fifteen years earlier.⁵² In the Sixth Ward close by City Hall was the most notorious slum area of all, Five Points, formed at the juncture of Anthony Street (Worth Street today), Orange Street (today’s Baxter Street), Cross Street (Park Street today), Mulberry Street, and Little Water Street (no longer extant). Symbolizing the horror of this district was the Old Brewery, converted into a tenement in 1837 and housing as many as a thousand residents at a time before being torn

down in 1852.⁵³ Charles Dickens described what he observed during his visit to Five Points in 1842:

This is the place, these narrow ways, diverging to the right and left, and reeking everywhere with filth. . . . Here too, are lanes and alleys, paved with mud knee-deep . . . ruined houses, open to the street, whence, through wide gaps in the walls, other ruins loom upon the eye . . . hideous tenements . . . all that is loathsome, drooping, and decayed is here.⁵⁴

In the Sixth Ward the deathrate in 1863 was three times that of the entire city. Residents of other tenement districts fared hardly better, existing in the most crowded, unsanitary conditions imaginable and subject to periodic outbreaks of diseases brought on by filth and impure water: typhoid, dysentery, typhus, and, what historian Charles Rosenberg terms “the classic epidemic disease of the nineteenth century,” cholera, which struck the city in 1832, 1849, and 1866.⁵⁵ During the first cholera outbreak in 1832, before the scientific bases of that and other diseases were discovered and made known, it was widely assumed that its victims were the recipients of God’s punishment for their intemperate ways. Their poverty was their fault as were the consequences of their poverty, including disease. Such is the inference of a Board of Health report on the epidemic that stated “the low Irish suffered the most, being exceedingly dirty in their habits, much addicted to intemperance, and crowded together into the worst positions of the city.”⁵⁶

Though cholera was not restricted to the city’s immigrant population, it did bear the brunt of the outbreaks. And among the immigrants the Irish, being the most numerous, the weakest upon arrival in the city, and comparatively poorer, suffered the most. In the 1849 cholera year Irish-born residents represented more than 40 percent of the city’s death toll from the disease.⁵⁷ In the ten years between 1849 and 1859, 85 percent of the foreign-born patients admitted to Bellevue Hospital were Irish. The 1855 census reveals that the Irish constituted 53.9 percent of the city’s foreign-born population.⁵⁸

The reality of having grown from small town to major metropolis in just a few decades unfortunately was not reflected in municipal services. Prior to 1866 roaming hogs served as the city’s principal garbage collectors. Not until the completion of the Croton Aqueduct in 1842 did clean water begin to flow into the city, and not until 1849 did the

government begin to build a municipal sewer system. A uniformed police force first appeared on the streets in 1853; and, despite a devastating "Great Fire" in 1858, which destroyed a seventeen block area south of Wall Street, a professional city fire department was not established until 1865. Even after municipal services were instituted, it often took years before the improvements were felt in the poorer districts. For example, in 1857 the sewer system served but 138 miles of the city's nearly 500 miles of streets.⁵⁹ When in 1865 45 of 90 tenants of a First Avenue building contracted typhoid fever, it was found that the tenement's outdoor privies "were less than six feet from the house, not connected with a sewer" and, according to the investigating police surgeon, "in the 'worst possible condition.'"⁶⁰

To help make ends meet, immigrant families often made space available in their cramped quarters for paying boarders, usually unattached young men and women. But even more popular, particularly for single men, were a multiplicity of boardinghouses.⁶¹ For the young person fresh off the boat and with little money there were the lodging cellars in the lower wards, where for pennies a week boarders had the privilege of sleeping on the floor and receiving a meager diet. However, most boardinghouses were considerably more comfortable and, though hardly luxurious, were generally clean, with decent food, the companionship of fellow boarders, and a degree of privacy. Rent in better boardinghouses was usually higher than that charged by families who took in boarders. An 1857 description of one such establishment for eighty male boarders indicates that the living quarters were cramped but clean and that the food was plain but abundant. A Sunday dinner there included meat, potatoes, cabbage, and squash eaten in an atmosphere of joviality. Saturday evenings were given over to cards, board games, and dominoes, and once a year the lodgers held a dance, complete with orchestra.⁶² As a general rule the residents of boardinghouses shared a common language, so that there were German boardinghouses, French boardinghouses, and those where Irish, Scots, and other English-speaking immigrant workers lodged.⁶³ Yet, as might be expected in this diverse city, in 1855 one Sixth Ward house owned by a German couple housed twenty-one male lodgers, including fourteen Germans, three Irish, two Dutch, one French, and one Hungarian.⁶⁴

During this period most people lived within walking distance of where they worked, and though there was a growing tendency for the

more affluent to commute from home to job, few wards lacked a population of the well-off. In 1865 the Council of Hygiene reported that in the Sixth Ward "two-thirds of the population is composed of the lowest grades of the laboring poor, and of the vicious classes; the remaining third is made up of better classes of people who live upon wages."⁶⁵ Among the latter were skilled and semiskilled workers, businessmen and professionals directly or indirectly tied for their livelihood to the factories and shops located there.⁶⁶

New York's East Side was where most of the working class, and consequently the immigrants, who constituted a majority of that population, lived. During the 1820s a core of Irish settlement developed in the Sixth Ward, and during the same years the Tenth and Eleventh wards had heavy enough concentrations of Germans to earn the appellation *Kleindeutschland* (Little Germany). With the huge influx of immigrants after 1840, however, neither the Irish nor the German neighborhoods were able to absorb all their recently arrived countrymen. There was no ethnic homogeneity in New York wards; the Sixth Ward, for example, in 1855 held "approximately fourteen thousand Irish, fifty-two hundred Germans, twelve hundred English and Scotch, one thousand Italians and Polish, and fifteen hundred persons of other nationalities."⁶⁷ The New York State Census of 1855 demonstrates that of the city's twenty-two wards the largest percentage of foreign-born residents resided in the Fourth and Sixth wards, yet even there 30 percent of the population was native born.⁶⁸

Nonetheless, the numbers of German and Irish immigrants were so great that their presence was strongly felt in certain wards. In 1855 the Irish constituted 46 percent of the population of the First Ward, 45.6 percent of the Fourth Ward, and 42.4 percent of the Sixth Ward, while the Germans dominated the Tenth, Eleventh and Seventeenth wards with 30.3 percent, 33.6 percent, and 27.3 percent respectively. Irish and Germans workers were present in sufficient numbers to sometimes populate entire boardinghouses and tenements, and even whole streets.⁶⁹

Though the heaviest concentrations of Irish and Germans were on the East Side of Manhattan, their numbers were too great to exclude them from any of the city's wards. By the 1850s settlements of both of these groups had spread across New York City's East River border. The Germans were particularly mobile. They constituted two-thirds of the population of Brooklyn's Williamsburg. In Queens's Astoria, and

Brooklyn's Flatbush, German farmers had already developed market gardens to feed Manhattan's wants. By the 1860s Manhattan's German population was following the brewers uptown to Yorkville and turning Brooklyn Heights into a heavily German neighborhood.⁷⁰

By 1860 the Irish (203,740) and the Germans (118,292) were the dominant immigrant groups of the city. The third largest contingent of newcomers during this era was from the remaining regions of the British Isles—England, Scotland, and Wales—but their numbers seem minuscule (37,187) when compared with the masses of Irish and Germans.⁷¹ Sharing both the English language and Protestant religion with the majority of the city's native-born residents, they had little difficulty assimilating. Unlike the many destitute Irish, they possessed skills that they could use in the rapidly expanding city. British immigrants appear to have favored the Hudson River wards, particularly the Eighth, but they were found scattered throughout the city.⁷²

Despite the advantages of language, religion, and skills, British immigrants, like those from other lands, were not immune to the hardships imposed by the city's business cycles. Some found themselves penniless and living in the almshouse or as charity cases in the city's hospitals. Also, in true immigrant fashion, Scottish, English, and Welsh immigrants sought out their countrymen in the city. Scots drank their ale and ate food at taverns like John O'Groats's House, the Lady of the Lake Tavern, the Burns House, and the Blue Bonnet. During the 1840s they read the *Scottish Patriot*, which carried news of home. When military companies composed of native-born New Yorkers refused to admit them, Scottish men organized their own military companies, the Scottish Guard and the Highland Guards. As they had in Scotland, members of New York's Scot's community attended Presbyterian churches. When the Reformed Presbyterian Church opened its doors in 1833, it shortly became known as "the Scotch church," reflecting the national origins of its members.⁷³

Welsh New Yorkers were eager to preserve the language and customs of their native land. The first Welsh newspaper published in the United States, *Cymro American*, appeared in New York in 1832, and others followed in the 1850s. By the 1830s several small Welsh congregations existed in the city. They provided places for worship for these immigrants and sponsored singing competitions, for which Wales had long been famous. The main secular organization devoted to promoting

Welsh affairs and to preserving the Welsh language was the St. David's Society, which sponsored an annual St. David's Day festival.

English immigrants, too, formed their own institutions. They mostly joined the city's established Methodist and Episcopalian churches, but a few felt the need to organize their own Anglo-American Free Church of St. George the Martyr in 1840. The elite among New York's English celebrated Queen Victoria's birthday and organized several London-style social clubs, the most esteemed being the St. George's Society. Those less high up in the social order found conviviality at one of the handful of English style pubs. A few newspapers were established for English immigrants, but they could not compete for long with the city's main line English language press.⁷⁴

Irish Protestants, called Orangemen for their allegiance to the Protestantism of William of Orange, who had assumed the English throne in 1689, did not wish in any way to be identified with the city's growing number of Irish Catholics. These Protestant Irish, mostly from Ulster, brought the Orange order to the city as early as the 1820s, and they organized separate lodges in the 1860s.⁷⁵ Ulstermen celebrated Boyne Day on July 12. The holiday marked the anniversary of William of Orange's victory over King James II at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 that insured Protestant ascendancy in Great Britain and Ireland. To show their displeasure of Irish Catholics, on Boyne Day in 1824 they marched in a predominately Irish Catholic neighborhood with Orange banners waving. This particular demonstration resulted in a street brawl between the two factions of Irishmen.⁷⁶

Yet that clash and several others following were minor compared to the Orange riot of 1871. The Orangemen insisted on a holding a parade celebrating that year's Boyne Day. Tensions had been rising for years, as many Orangemen, along with other New York Protestants, claimed that Catholics threatened American values and were undesirable citizens. Rumors of violence and threats by both Irish Protestants and Catholics prompted the city and state to provide police and military protection for the marchers. When the parade, with its military accompaniment, reached the west twenties along Eighth Avenue, shots were fired and rocks thrown. Panic ensued as the militia lost control and fired indiscriminately; the death total was sixty-two, mostly Irish Catholics killed by militia bullets.⁷⁷ Boyne Day celebrations continued for a few more years, but the 1871 riot was the last of the major riots

pitting Irish Catholics against Irish Protestants. Many Orangemen joined nativist organizations like the American Protective Association and the Order of United American Mechanics in the 1870s and 1880s, and continued to argue that Catholicism was a menace to their city.⁷⁸

Immigrants from France and other countries, as had those from Great Britain, settled throughout the city. The poorer among them were more likely to be found in the lower wards of the East Side, while the more comfortable moved north along the West Side. Thus, by 1860 the 8,074 French, who constituted the city's fourth largest immigrant group and who had few laborers or destitute among them, were found in greatest numbers along the Hudson River wards, Washington Square, near Fifth Avenue in the fifties, and on the East Side above Tenth Street.⁷⁹

In the years after 1830 small numbers of immigrants arrived from Switzerland, the Netherlands, Bohemia, and the Scandinavian countries. These people tended to locate in the East Side wards, some of them in areas dominated by other national groups with similar linguistic roots: French-speaking Swiss among the French, German-speaking Swiss and Dutch among the Germans.⁸⁰

The city's immigrants even included a few from those ethnic groups who would dominate migration patterns by the turn of the century. The first Greeks, for example, arrived as refugees from the turmoil of the Greek War for Independence in the 1820s and were followed by merchants who settled in lower Manhattan after 1870.⁸¹ Poles also numbered among the early arrivals. By 1852, there were enough to create a Polish Democratic Club with 200 members. More arrived in the 1870s, establishing a notable colony in the Williamsburg-Greenpoint section of Brooklyn near where the Williamsburg Bridge would eventually connect Brooklyn and Manhattan. It was during the 1870s that Polish Catholics organized their first church, dedicated to St. Stanislaus.⁸²

The small Italian colony that established roots in the city during the early decades of the century had by 1880 grown to approximately 20,000, of whom 12,000 were foreign born. The first arrivals, mainly from Northern Italy, found housing in the Five Points and other nearby slum blocks. Even before the late-century mass migration, the area around Mulberry Bend in lower Manhattan was commonly referred to as "Little Italy."⁸³

Many of the Italians of the early decades were unskilled laborers, forced into jobs at the bottom of the economy and often depicted by

native New Yorkers in such unflattering terms as "a vagabond but harmless class of organ grinders, rag-pickers . . . and the like."⁸⁴ But Italy also sent New York a goodly number of the skilled workers for which its northern regions were noted: chefs, stonecutters, mosaic makers, carpenters, and cabinet makers. These people were generally warmly received, as were the Italian merchants who by 1830 had established shops on Bleecker, MacDougal, Sullivan, and Thompson streets, just south of Washington Square.⁸⁵ As one New Yorker noted:

[The Italian grocer takes] great pride in the artistic arrangement of fruit so that they will attract the eye; the Italian barber has transformed the appearance of the barber shop and has made it clean and attractive, displaying the sign of "Tonsorial Artist"; while the boot-black, beginning with a tiny box, rises to the established chair . . . , sparing no effort in his attempt to render satisfactory service and in making himself affable and agreeable. There is absolutely no doubt about this class being a permanent population, and it may be observed that their business success is notable and that they have brought their trade to a higher level than that in which they found it.⁸⁶

The political upheaval of an Italy striving for unification and independence from foreign domination "fueled the flight to New York" of intellectuals, musicians, composers, and men of letters. Vincenzo Botta, formerly a member of the Sardinian parliament, became a professor of modern languages at New York University and served as president of the Union League Club. E. P. Fabbri, a partner of J. P. Morgan, was instrumental in endowing the Italian School that opened on Leonard Street in 1855. In 1879, Luigi Palma de Cesnola, who won the Congressional Medal of Honor for service as a brigadier general in the heavily Italian Garibaldi Guard during the Civil War, became director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Among the pioneers of opera in antebellum New York City were Ferdinand Palmo, who invested and ultimately lost his baker-business fortune in a lavish opera house on Chambers Street; Luigi Arditi, composer of *La Spia* based on James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Spy*; and Alavatore Patti, who as co-director helped make the Astor Place Opera House, erected in 1847, the city's most successful opera venture yet.⁸⁷

In 1879, on the eve of what was to be termed the "New Immigration," the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the

Poor declared that "no more peaceable, thrifty, orderly neighbors could be found than these Italians. They do not beg, are seldom or never arrested for theft, are quiet, though quick to quarrel among themselves, are equally ready to forgive."⁸⁸

The city's first Chinese immigrants also appeared during this era, but their numbers were not large. A census taken in 1855 recorded thirty-eight Chinese men who lived in lower Manhattan. Some were sailors, other operators of boardinghouses, proprietors of small businesses, peddlers, or cigar makers.⁸⁹ Some of these male settlers married Irish women, and a few even became American citizens. By 1873 the *New York Times* reported some 500 Chinese were living in New York, about half in the emerging Chinatown of lower Manhattan.⁹⁰

Immigrants from all lands shared a variety of experiences: the crossing, the landing, the tenement and boardinghouse, the poverty. They all formed organizations like the St. Andrew's Society, the St. George's Society, the Irish Emigrant Society, and the German Society to aid newcomers at the docks, while ethnic newspapers and fraternal organizations kept them informed of affairs of interest to immigrants. And when the Civil War broke out, many of the foreign born flocked to the colors. Among the volunteer units organized by the city's ethnic groups were the German 8th Regiment, the Polish Legion, the Cameron Rifle Highlanders, the Guard de La Fayette, the Netherlanders' Legion, and the Garibaldi Guard, which was made up of Hungarians, French, Spaniards, and Croats as well as Italians.⁹¹

By 1860 it had become obvious that New York City had been reshaped by the coming and settling of this immigrant wave. It wasn't simply the newcomers' vast numbers or their ethnic variety that accounted for this. Of utmost importance was the fact that the metropolis became numerically dominated by immigrants from Ireland and Germany. These people were so different in so many ways and present in such large numbers that they could not be ignored, nor could they fail to make a significant impact. Of the 813,669 residents of New York City in 1860, 383,717 were of foreign birth, but almost six of seven of these were from Germany and Ireland.⁹² Their experiences in the city must provide the primary focus of our discussion of immigration and ethnicity during these years and will be considered in the next chapter.

Before moving on, however, it is important to recall that race as well as ethnicity or nationality was a vital factor in New York. All native-

born white citizens and newly arrived immigrants came in contact with, affected, and were affected by the city's black residents. We have noted how the city's anti-slavery society, formed in 1785, failed to convince the state's white residents to abolish slavery, and in fact during the decade following the adoption of the Constitution the number of bondsmen in the city actually increased. This was in part due to the influx of French emigres fleeing the slave rebellion in Haiti; a number of these refugees brought their slaves with them. Members of the New York Manumission Society, some of whom themselves owned slaves, achieved a limited victory with the passage of the Gradual Manumission Act of 1799, a law that freed males born after that date at age twenty-eight and females at age twenty-five.⁹³ A few unscrupulous owners subsequently sold their slaves rather than waiting to give them freedom, a practice the Manumission Society successfully fought in the state legislature. In 1820 the census takers found only 518 black bondsmen in the city, and in 1827 legislation emancipating all slaves in the state took final effect. By 1830 there were no slaves in New York.⁹⁴

Emancipation did not bring equality, nor is there much evidence of great improvement of life for black New Yorkers now living in freedom. During legislative debates over the abolition of slavery, white New Yorkers made clear their belief that blacks should not have equal civil rights. A few abolitionists wanted to grant blacks equal suffrage, but even this proposal was omitted from the state's new constitution in 1821. Moreover, on three occasions the state's white voters rejected an equal ballot for black males; not until the nation ratified the Fifteenth Amendment (1870) did they finally obtain that right of citizenship. Voters in New York City were more opposed to black suffrage than those elsewhere in the state. This was in part due to hostility by the black's chief competitors on the bottom of the economic and social ladder, the Irish and the Germans.⁹⁵ Ugly comments were made during the attempts to secure black voting. One Democratic paper warned of potential interracial sex and of black arrogance if the proposition passed. "The negroes of Five Points long for the day when they will be privileged to take to their arms the palefaced beauties of the Caucasian race in the city of New York. Already the waiters and whitewashes and bootblacks have grown impudent in anticipation of the bright prospect before them."⁹⁶

Due to the virulent racism of the nineteenth century, black New Yorkers found themselves limited largely to low paying and menial

employment opportunities. During slavery many bondsmen had worked as household servants, and they continued to labor at these jobs after emancipation, because few other occupations were open to them. In 1797 the New York Manumission Society found that most blacks were employed as domestics and laborers with only a few small traders and mechanics.⁹⁷ State census takers subsequently reported similar occupational patterns, and in 1855 revealed that 75 percent of employed blacks were still common service workers. Black women were even more restricted than men in their opportunities; they usually worked as household employees or as laundresses.⁹⁸

For those fortunate few who learned a trade, chances to ply it were limited. Remarked one white affiliated with black education, "A few have obtained trades of the following description: viz. Sail Makers, Shoemakers, Tin Workers, Tailors, Carpenters, Blacksmiths, etc. . . . In almost every instance, difficulties have attended them on account of their color, either in obtaining a thorough knowledge of the trades, or, after they have obtained them, in finding employment in good shops."⁹⁹ Moreover, the embryonic labor movement before the Civil War virtually ignored black workers. When New York barbers decided to organize for higher prices, whites insisted on establishing separate black and white associations.¹⁰⁰

Yet despite all these impediments, a small black elite did emerge in the nineteenth century. In the 1850s black New York boasted nine doctors and four lawyers, but most in the professional category were teachers in black schools or clergy serving black churches.¹⁰¹ In the 1790s, the most famous black tradesman was Samuel Fraunces, owner of Fraunces Tavern where George Washington bid farewell to his troops. Most blacks working in the food industry, however, did not own taverns but rather were waiters and porters in hotels and restaurants.¹⁰² Blacks worked as barbers, and a few even owned their own shops. Lacking capital and clientele to expand, tradesmen generally ran small shops but were hindered by a reluctance of city officials to grant them licenses. In 1835 and again the next year, for example, two blacks were denied licenses to become cartmen.¹⁰³

The arrival of waves of immigrants after 1830 helped the city grow rapidly, but to black New Yorkers the newcomers hardly represented a blessing. Immigrants desperate for work took whatever jobs were available, often at the expense of blacks. Though the numbers of blacks were

too small to offer much competition to immigrants, in some occupations the two groups clashed. Conflict occurred over securing positions as house servants, barbers, porters, stevedores, brick makers, coachmen, and whitewashes.¹⁰⁴

Both blacks and immigrants, especially the Irish, believed that each stood in the way of the other's opportunities, and the occasional use of black strikebreakers aggravated a tense situation. In 1854 employers replaced striking white longshoremen with blacks only to discharge them when the strike failed.¹⁰⁵ A few years later economic conflicts with racial overtones led to violence in Brooklyn. One tobacco factory there employed a mixed labor force, while a second factory hired only blacks. Racial tensions aroused by the latter situation led to the burning of the factory by an angry mob of whites.¹⁰⁶ In 1863 long standing economic hostility and the association of blacks with the suffering of the Civil War combined to make them the primary victims of the predominately Irish mob action of the New York City draft riots.

Given the limited incomes of black New Yorkers, it is not surprising that they lived in the city's worst housing. Manhattan had no distinct racial ghetto before the Civil War, so blacks and whites frequently resided side by side in the same blocks and sometimes occupied apartments in the same tenements. On occasion black families took in white boarders.¹⁰⁷ If there was a core of black settlement, it was north of Chambers Street up to Houston Street and on the West Side of Manhattan between 23rd and 40th streets.¹⁰⁸ But if blacks did not live in a distinct racial neighborhood, they usually occupied the most inferior housing. Charles Dickens described their dwellings as "leprous houses," "hideous tenements," and "cramped hutches," places, "where dogs would howl to lie, women, and men and boys slink off to sleep, forcing the dislodged rats to move away."¹⁰⁹

Under such crowded and unsanitary conditions it was not surprising that black residents suffered from poor health. Typhus fever, small pox, tuberculosis, pneumonia, and bronchitis were all too common among the city poor, black and white. The death rate among blacks was probably the highest in the city.¹¹⁰

Neither the state nor the city of New York passed codes segregating their black citizens. Yet blacks found themselves segregated or barred from using privately owned public facilities. Blacks did use the city's horse-drawn street cars at times, but treatment varied. Some companies

refused African Americans permission to ride, while others allowed them to travel on a separate outside platform, regardless of the weather.¹¹¹ Angered by their treatment, individual blacks organized a Legal Rights Association and took transit companies to court. After Elizabeth Jennings, a black woman on her way to church, was injured when she was forcibly ejected from the Third Avenue omnibus in 1854, she sued and won damages. Her counsel was Chester Arthur, future President of the United States. Similar suits against the Sixth and Eighth avenue lines won changes in transit policy, so that by the time of the Civil War, most of these public conveyances admitted blacks.¹¹²

During the antebellum period, blacks were regularly ejected from the ferry connecting Manhattan and Brooklyn and kept out of most theaters, restaurants, and places of public amusement. Frederick Douglass said that on the Hudson River steamers blacks were "compelled sometimes to stroll the deck nearly all night, before they can get a place to lie down, and that place frequently unfit for a dog's accommodation."¹¹³

Even the churches of New York City segregated black congregants. Those attending white churches were seated in the rear, in an "African corner," or "Nigger pew." Others abandoned white churches entirely to found their own congregations. The independent black church movement began in Philadelphia in 1787, when the Rev. Richard Allen led a group of black worshippers out of a predominately white congregation, where they were unwelcome, to organize the African Methodist Church. African Americans founded similar black independent churches in New York City, among them Episcopal, Congregational, Presbyterian, and Methodist.¹¹⁴ When the black St. Philip's Protestant Episcopal Church, organized in 1819, petitioned the Episcopal diocese of New York in 1846 to be received into the diocese's convention, white churchmen rejected the request. A majority report declared that blacks "are socially degraded, and are not regarded as proper associations for the class of persons who attend our convention."¹¹⁵ Not until 1853, after repeated applications for entry, did the white Episcopalians finally admit St. Philip's to the convention. The Episcopal church's General Theological Seminary, on the other hand, consistently refused to accept black applicants.¹¹⁶

New Yorkers largely segregated their public and private schools, though a few black children did attend white schools. The Manumission Society founded the first African Free School in 1787 and orga-

nized several others for newly freed blacks before transferring their control and management to the privately operated New York Public School Society in 1834. During the 1850s these "colored schools" became part of the city's newly created public school system. Through these years the schools continued to teach basic elementary education, stressed moral uplift, and operated on a racially segregated basis. Blacks also operated several schools of their own from time to time, but these ventures lacked adequate financing to survive.¹¹⁷

In Brooklyn blacks apparently attended some mixed schools until the 1820s. Then segregation became more rigid, and black Brooklynites established their own schools. When a public school system was created, black schools were placed under white control, but continued to employ black teachers.¹¹⁸ In both New York and Brooklyn black public schools were underfunded and black teachers paid lower salaries than their white colleagues. Prejudice dictated that black education, no matter how thorough, did not lead to good jobs, and so most students left at an early age to seek employment. A black New Yorker commented in 1859, "It is a common complaint of colored teachers that their pupils are taken from school at the very time when their studies become most useful and attractive."¹¹⁹

Black New Yorkers, though generally poor and few in number, nonetheless founded and supported their own institutions. During the anti-slavery struggle, African-American New Yorkers organized an anti-slavery society, took an active role in the abolitionist movement, and ran charities for orphans. Their clergy not only gave spiritual comfort but also provided leadership to the black community. The Rev. Samuel Cornish served for 20 years on the executive committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society, while other ministers joined similar anti-slavery groups.¹²⁰ Cornish, along with John Russwurm, also founded the nation's first black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*.

The birth of the anti-slavery Republican party and the coming of the Civil War and the Reconstruction Era brought new hope for New York's black residents. As southern slavery ended and as black troops fought well in the war, a growing number of whites accepted the notion of some equal rights for black citizens. The passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments reflected this emerging national consensus, though exactly what rights black Americans would actually attain remained in doubt.

When the widow of a black soldier was ejected from an Eighth Avenue street car reserved for whites, the Union League rallied to her support and prepared to take her case to court. The company, however, capitulated, and consequently such discrimination on public cars in the city ended.¹²¹ Finally, in 1873 the state legislature enacted a civil rights law prohibiting discrimination because of race or color on public conveyances, in theaters, inns, and other public amusements. The law was not rigorously enforced, however, and African-American New Yorkers continued to face a depressing racism in the late nineteenth century.¹²²

The degraded condition of African-American New Yorkers prompted some observers to equate their plight with those of the incoming Irish. Both groups occupied miserable tenement housing, lived lives of wretched poverty, and faced virulent prejudice. But no white group, not even the Irish, suffered so much for so long as did the blacks. Nonetheless, among European immigrants entering the city during the nineteenth century, the Irish did encounter the most difficulties and were subject to the most hostility by native-born citizens. Their experiences and those of the German immigrants will be discussed in some detail in the chapter that follows.

*Diversity
in Action:
Irish and
German
Immigrants
in a
Growing
City,
1789–1880*

i

It is a truism to assert that the Irish, the largest of the era's immigrant populations, were probably the least suited by experience, training, and culture for city life. As a consequence, they provide the story of America's first highly visible urban, poor-white minority group. While not all the immigrant Irish were impoverished and unskilled, so many of them were that as a group they received less of the good and more of the bad that life in New York City offered. As early as the 1790s observers noted the poverty of the city's Irish Catholics. A majority of the victims of the yellow fever epidemic in 1795 were Irish, and so many poor Irish appeared in the 1790s that the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick could scarce-