

Window Opens Into New York's Immigrant Past

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Body

To the Editor:

While preparing to celebrate our **immigrant** heritage, we are losing a great opportunity to learn how some **immigrants** actually lived. **New** park construction in lower Manhattan has exposed the earth on a historic site, but no archeological work is being done.

The southwest corner of the construction site, at Baxter and Worth Streets, was part of the old Five Points, the first place in **New** York City settled by Irish **immigrants** in the 1820's. By midcentury, the Five Points had a solid reputation as the most desperate locale in **New** York. Its notoriety spread through Europe, partly because of Charles Dickens's shocking descriptions in "American Notes."

The northern half of the construction site was part of the block known as Mulberry Bend, immortalized by Jacob Riis in "How the Other Half Lives." Writing in 1888, two years after the Statue of Liberty was completed, Riis observed, "There is but one 'Bend' in the world, and it is enough." By then, southern Italians had replaced the Irish, but living conditions had not improved. A tenement housing commission found that 155 children younger than 5 had died on that one block in 1882.

In the 1890's, the tenements of the Bend were demolished and replaced by a park. Between the mounds of bricks turned up in the current park construction, one can see the tops of old basements. Reports on the area throughout the 19th century refer to underground tunnels, warrens and even illegal burials. Undoubtedly much was exaggerated. But we are missing a chance to find out what was true. BRIAN FERGUSON **New** York, June 6, 1986
The writer is assistant professor of anthropology at Rutgers University.

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