

## SHANTY TOWN, NEW YORK

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*It's only a shanty in old shanty town; It's roof is so slanty, it touches the ground.  
Just a tumbled down shack by an old railroad track, but like a millionaire's mansion it's calling me back.  
I'd give up my palace if I were a king; it's more than a palace – it's my everything.  
There's a queen waiting there, in a silvery crown; in a shanty in old shanty town*

Lyrics - Joe Young (1932)

Central Park in New York City was the first landscaped public park in the United States. Today it's 843-acre expanse is the most expensive piece of not-for-sale real estate in the entire world. Yet, it has a dark side. Original advocates of creating the park were primarily wealthy New Yorkers, who wanted an attractive area for their carriage rides on a Sunday afternoon. However, there was just one thing in the way of its construction. The land proposed was dotted with the homes of thousands of underprivileged working-class families.

The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 had made New York the financial and commercial capital of the nation, attracting many new businesses and residents. The new rich of the city, who admired the public parks of London and Paris, urged that New York needed a comparable facility to enhance its international reputation. In an effort to put a charitable tone on their argument, they claimed that a public park would provide working-class New Yorkers with a healthy alternative to saloons. However, while faced with the expense of a rapidly growing population, the city was also besieged with a flood of Irish immigrants fleeing the 1845 - 50 failure of the potato crop in Ireland as well as German immigrants fleeing 1848 revolutions in Germany. The population of the city grew faster than housing allowed, leading to the overcrowding of old houses as owners subdivided property and crammed as many tenants as possible into space far too confining for healthy living.

A recently filled-in pond below Canal Street became an area known as The Five Points – the worst overcrowded slum in the United States, if not the world, with inadequate services for sanitation, health and welfare. Those unwilling to commit their families to the misery of the Points or unable to afford the tenement rents, settled on vacant land north of the city. That land, between today's Fifth and Eighth avenues north of 59<sup>th</sup> street, was a muddy tract of broken, irregular, rocky acreage, undesirable for private development. It had been a settler's colony since 1825 with residents erecting cabins or shacks as best they could. The dwellings housed Irish and German immigrants, runaway slaves, freed blacks and others who were not welcome in the heart of the city due to their poverty, health, religion, or race. These communities, nicknamed Dutch Hill, Dublin Corners, the Piggery and Seneca Village, were estimated by one New York newspaper to contain between 12 and 16,000 souls. If municipal services were painfully inadequate in the slums, they were virtually non-existent in those collective communities which came to be known as Shanty Town, named from the Irish sean (*old*) and tigh (*house*) to describe the rough, makeshift dwellings of those unable to afford anything more substantial. In addition to the settler's dwellings, were the 'nuisance industries' banned from operating within city limits such as glue, soap and candle factories which emitted bad odors and bone-boiling plants that made oil used to refine sugar. There were also stone quarries, farms, taverns, and even a Sisters of Charity convent in Shanty Town.

The largest ethnic population of Shanty Town were Irish families who had fled the Great Hunger to seek a better life in America. Unable to find accommodations in the city, they wandered onto the unused land above 60<sup>th</sup> Street and erected small, one-room cabins on small plots of land. The homes they built were, in many cases, no better or worse than those they'd left in Ireland, but at least there were no bill, tithe and tax collectors, and no threat of eviction. This was the freedom they had come to America to find and they settled in to plant a crop and raise a few livestock. However, to the growing *nouveau riche* of New York, these people were dirty, unkempt and lived with animals further alienating them from polite society.

There was also a community of German Catholic farmers who began to farm and sell their produce from push carts in the city. There was a community known as Seneca Village which was an African-American settlement of freed blacks, who were not above lending a helping hand to runaway slaves. These largely Irish-German-African shanty towns began to grow larger after 1880. With no plan for the layout of streets and pathways, dwellings were erected wherever the rocky ground would permit. Even though the settlements included schools, churches, cemeteries, shops, and public hospitals, a newspaper of the time described the look of the structures as if it they were *constructed by crazy poets and distributed by a whirlwind*.

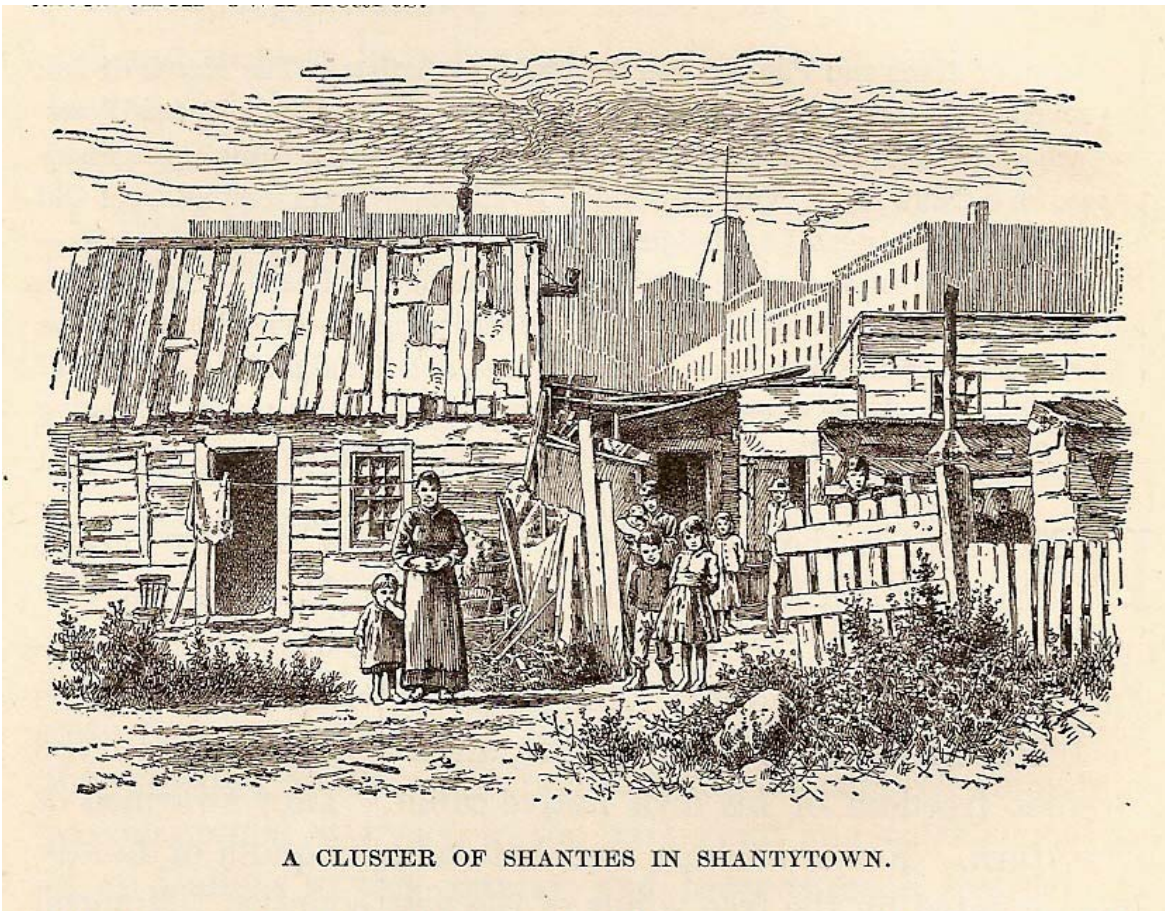
By the end of the Civil War, the city began marching north. Fifth Avenue, up to 59th Street, boasted more than 340 private residences, among which were many of the city's largest and most extravagant homes. By the

late 1800s, Fifth Avenue had become synonymous with wealth, high fashion, and architectural elegance. As the gentry began to build their new mansions north of 59<sup>th</sup> street, they looked out from their Victorian drawing rooms on shantys settled by immigrants who operated truck farms and kept goats, chickens, and pigs. When millionaire Andrew Carnegie erected his mansion at Fifth Avenue and 91st Street, his nearest neighbors were living in a shack described as an *Irish architectural prototype*. This was definitely not acceptable.

After years of debate over the site and cost of a park, in 1853 the City suddenly used the power of eminent domain to confiscate more than 700 acres of land in the center of Manhattan. The land chosen was Shanty Town whose inhabitants were suddenly described as *disease-ridden tramps, squatters and thieves living in dilapidated shacks surrounded by pigs, sheep, and cows*. The settlers had no chance in the face of the press-inspired prejudice generated in a politically charged environment amid rising prices of the residential land all around them. The city notified the squatters, as they were now called, that they would have to go.

By the summer of 1856, about 1,600 working-class families were offered an insultingly low stipend for their land and their homes and told to clear out. These families had no political or economic power with which to argue against those who wanted a park playground. The residents were evicted through 1857, and their homes were torn down. The civil servant in charge of carrying out the sad task of evictions was the great-great grandfather of future New York Yankee great, Joe Pepitone. No provisions were made for the relocation of those who were displaced. To the Irish, they had been evicted again; this time in a land where they believed it would never happen. Little investigation has ever been done regarding this shameful event in New York history. Once done, it was forgotten. But where did the evicted go? What became of their families?

After blasting out rocky ridges with more gunpowder than was used at the Battle of Gettysburg, workers moved 3 million cubic yards of soil and planted more than 270,000 trees and shrubs. In the end, it cost more to build Central Park than it did to purchase Alaska, so why wasn't there enough money to relocate the displaced families? We shall never know. After the destruction of Shanty Town, the inhabitants vanished without a trace. The next time you read of someone losing their wallet or purse to a pickpocket or purse snatcher in Central Park, think about those families who lost so much more in that same park. After all, many of today's New Yorkers could be their descendants.



A CLUSTER OF SHANTIES IN SHANTYTOWN.