

The Mystic Hordes of Memory: How Thomas Nast went from Five Points to *Frank Leslie's Illustrated News*

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Thomas Nast was born on September 27, 1840, in Landau, Bavaria. By 1855, he was a full-time employee of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated News*. This job, his first, launched a career which would become legendary, and would profoundly shape American politics in the nineteenth century. Yet little is known about the youth of this influential and complicated artist.

Understanding Nast's life and work requires examining how he became an artist, how he joined the ranks of journalists as a newspaper illustrator, and how he interpreted his entry into professional life. Yet describing that entry is difficult. The difficulty arises because Nast's version of his youth is incomplete. It tells a simple story of the rise of an immigrant boy, emphasizing talent, luck, and the kindness of strangers. Nast hardly mentioned the dislocation, confusion, and tension caused by emigration and arrival in a new land, and he romanticized his family history. In order fully to understand his life it is necessary to fill in the blanks in Nast's story, to examine not only the history to which he admitted, but also that which he omitted. This includes a much more detailed examination of the people and places Nast encountered as a child, and of the little known about his family life.

This essay begins by presenting Nast's youth as he described it to his biographer. The account is simplistic, shallow, and rosy. A fuller picture emerges with an examination of Nast's neighborhood. Finally, Nast's entry into illustrated journalism is probed. What emerges is a tale very different from Nast's. In this version, the life of the streets was central to his success, and the immigrant experience was as ugly as it was hopeful. Moreover, Nast's youth suggests two important points about historical

memory. First, it is not enough to acknowledge that people re-tell their life stories. Rather, historians should see the act of re-telling as an imaginative one. Subjects add to and erase from their history in order to present a particular personal image to the world. They comment on the past by admitted to and denying it. Second, the nuts and bolts of history and the subjective elements of it can be merged by comparing personal histories to bare facts. The contrast between historical reality and the memory of historical figures can illuminate much about the reliability of testamentary evidence and the practical reality of broad concepts.

The Story as Nast Told It

Albert Bigelow Paine published his biography of Thomas Nast in 1904.¹ It was the outgrowth of a series of conversations between Paine and Nast begun several years before at the Player's Club, a Manhattan gentleman's club. The two men, Paine forty-one years old to Nast's sixty, met when Paine provided Nast with a copy of his first book. Nast complimented the novel and invited Paine to join him before the fire, where the two enjoyed a long talk. Paine had been an admirer of Nast's since childhood, and the cartoonist was pleased by his enthusiastic praise. Nast asked whether Paine would agree to write his biography, and Paine agreed.² Based on this conversation, Paine began to meet with Nast, examine his papers, and compile information about his life. Many of the stories in Paine's earliest chapters are memories found nowhere in Nast's extant papers, and their tone and pacing suggests a conversation rather than a documentary source. Paine used no footnotes, so

¹ Albert Bigelow Paine, *Thomas Nast: His Period and His Pictures* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1904).

² Paine's account of this chat appears on pp. 1-4. His biography of Nast was Paine's first in what would become a distinguished career as a biographer, essayist, novelist and editor. Other biographies by Paine include: *Mark Twain, A Biography* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1912); *The Girl in White Armor: The Story of Joan of Arc* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1927, reprinted 1929, 1948, 1955, 1960, 1964, 1967, 1990); *Life and Lillian Gish* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1932); *Theodore N. Vail, A Biography* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1929); *Captain Bill McDonald, Texas Ranger, A Story of Frontier Reform* (New York: J.J. Little & Ives Co., 1909); and *A Sailor of Fortune, Personal Memoirs of Captain B.S. Osbon* (New York: McClure, Phillips and Co., 1906) this volume is also listed as the work of Osbon, so authorship is unclear. Paine expanded his biography of Twain in later years, creating a children's biography of Twain and editing Twain's letters and autobiography for publication. A more detailed discussion of Paine and Nast's first meeting, and the significance of Nast's biography for Paine's career, appears in the Conclusion.

determining the source of many of his quotes is impossible, but a reader can hardly help forming the impression that much of the material on Nast's childhood came directly from the artist. In addition, the small number of printed interviews and biographical sketches published during Nast's lifetime are consistent with the facts as they appear in Paine's book, but lack the detail provided by Paine. Virtually the only information available regarding Nast's first fifteen years appears in the 1904 biography.³ In this essay, Nast's voice emerges through Paine's text, and it is this which is presented as his version of events.

Thomas Nast was the last child of Appolonia Abriss and Joseph Thomas Nast.⁴ Information about his family is difficult to find, but a few facts are known. Nast was the only boy in his family when he was born, but there apparently had been two older brothers, both of whom were dead. Visits to their graves lingered in Nast's memory enough for him to mention the smell of the box hedges (planted to outline each grave) to Paine almost 60 years later.⁵ A surviving older sister is the only sibling Nast mentions, although no mention of her survives past their childhood.⁶

Nast's father played the trombone for the Landau based Ninth Regimental Bavarian Band. Many of the memories Nast provided to Paine at the turn of the century reflect an early childhood of great warmth and pleasure. In recognition of the toy soldiers Nast fashioned from his mother's wax, women in apartments upstairs would lower cookies to him on a string. At Christmas, a kindly, bearded gentleman in a fur coat would play the part of Pelze-Nicol, or St. Nicholas, walking from door to door distributing sweets to children. Nast's memories of Landau all seem to have been suffused with a sense of dreamy nostalgia. However, not all of

³ For example, "Caricaturists" in the Louisville *Courier-Journal*, Sunday December 11, 1887; "Caricature in the United States," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, pp. 25-42; and "American Caricaturists," unknown publication, in the collection of the Morristown Free Public Library, Nast folder. In 1976, Draper Hill, whose biography of James Gillray is the definitive work on that cartoonist, began to write a biography of Thomas Nast. It has never been finished, but in an unpublished chapter, Hill repeats some of Paine's details, along with confirming material from James Parton. Draper Hill, "Tommy on Top," pp. 88-90, in the collection of the Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Library and Center, Thomas Nast collection (GA-33), box 1.

⁴ Alice Caulkins, "Thomas Nast: A Chronology," *The Journal of the Thomas Nast Society*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1996): pp. 119-123.

⁵ Paine, *Thomas Nast*, p. 6.

⁶ The last reference to Nast's birth family in the Paine biography appears on page 68. Nast's sister is mentioned only in the very beginning of the book, on page 5.

Nast's childhood experiences could have been so positive. In 1846, political uncertainty in Bavaria intruded on the Nasts when Joseph Thomas Nast was warned by his commanding officer that he should leave the area before his politics caused trouble. Bavaria, like many other German principalities and European states, was engaged in a struggle between a highly educated, politically liberal reform movement and the entrenched power of the aristocracy and military. These tensions would erupt in revolution all across Europe in 1848, and Joseph Nast's political beliefs, too freely expressed for safety, were a problem. In response to a warning from his superior officer Joseph Nast left Landau to work on an American merchant marine vessel.⁷ Apollonia Nast, Thomas and his sister departed for Paris, where they found places on a ship bound for New York.⁸

Despite a bout with what may have been malaria, Thomas Nast weathered his trans-Atlantic voyage well, arriving at the Verrazano Narrows in mid-summer. His first view of New York was impressive enough to prompt the six year old Nast to comment that

⁷ It is unclear exactly what Joseph Nast's role on this vessel was. He may have signed on as a member of the ship's band, or as a single musician. It is also possible that he was a crewman, although nothing in Nast's surviving papers suggests that his father had any experience at sea. He could have been a passenger, but the fact that he left in 1846 and only arrived in New York in 1850 casts doubt on this option.

⁸ Paine, *Thomas Nast*, p. 13; W.G. Rogers asserts that the senior Nast came to America first and then sent for his wife and children. It is possible that in his travels at sea Nast, Sr., briefly visited New York, or stopped there long enough to determine whether his wife could emigrate safely, but Paine is clear that he did not live with the family until 1850. No other source supports Rogers, who provides no citation. W.G. Rogers, *Mightier Than the Sword: Cartoon, Caricature, Social Comment* (Harcourt, Brace & World: New York, 1969), p. 178. Al Boime, writing about Nast's connection to French art, notes that German sources have identified a slightly different possible itinerary for Joseph Thomas Nast. In this version, Joseph Thomas Nast deserted from an army musical tour, directing Apollonia Nast to take the two children and travel to New York, where he would meet them. A second version presented by Boime is that Joseph Thomas Nast obtained a release from the army after arranging for another man to take his place. He then emigrated with the family. Boime concludes, however, based in part on the clarity of Nast's recollection of Joseph Thomas Nast's return to the family in 1850, that the most likely story is that Nast, his mother and sister traveled alone in 1846 with Joseph Thomas Nast joining them later after a journey which probably included service on an American merchant marine vessel. See Al Boime, "Thomas Nast and French Art," in *The American Art Journal*, vol. IV, no. 1 (Spring 1872): 44, f. 11. Puran Singh Khalsa repeats the same sequence, citing Boime. Puran Singh Khalsa, "Thomas Nast and *Harper's Weekly*: 1862-1886," (Ph.D. diss, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1983). Further discussion of the Revolutions of 1848 occurs in section two of this essay.

he was “glad he came.”⁹ Appolonia Nast found her family a home on Greenwich Street, on the west side of Manhattan Island, and enrolled Nast in an English-speaking primary school.¹⁰ Unable to understand the language, Nast found the experience terribly confusing. He remembered other children “mischievously” directing him hither and thither, including a boy who sent Nast to line up with other children who were about to be spanked. Nast was unable to explain himself and thus could not evade the punishment he had not earned. Rushing home at lunch, he refused to return to school. Mrs. Nast, hoping to find a more congenial place for her family, moved east to William Street, in what Paine identifies as a German-speaking neighborhood.¹¹

At his new school, Nast could speak German with students and teachers. Even so, he concentrated more on drawing than on academics, using crayons given to him by a neighbor. Not only did he draw at school - his “desk ... was full of his efforts and the walls of the ... house on William Street were decorated with his masterpieces” - Nast pursued opportunities to draw throughout the city.¹² His favorite subjects were fires, and he often chased the engines of Company Six, when they left the station to fight a fire.¹³ As a result of his disinterest, Nast was never academically accomplished.

Nast’s family re-formed in 1850, when Joseph Nast finally returned from the sea. He found work with the Philharmonic Society and the band at Burton’s Theatre. Thomas went with his father sometimes, drawing the band in his sketchbook. His

⁹ Paine, *Thomas Nast*, p. 8. Paine notes that the wife of the ship’s captain treated Nast with “wine and quinine,” suggesting malaria. There is no evidence that Nast suffered the recurring fevers of some malaria patients, however, so it is possible that he simply had a fever and the lady gave him the medicine she had on hand.

¹⁰ Caulkins, “Thomas Nast: A Chronology,” p. 119.

¹¹ The ethnic complexity of this neighborhood is discussed at some length in section two of this essay. German-speaking residents were plentiful, however, so Paine’s description, while accurate as far as it went, was demonstrably incomplete.

¹² Paine, *Thomas Nast*, p. 13.

¹³ Company Six was the company of William M. Tweed, later called “Boss” Tweed. Its truck was decorated with the head of a tiger, a symbol Tweed suggested and which Tweed later adapted as the symbol of Tammany Hall. Thus Nast, who chased the tiger-headed truck as a child, would later adapt the tiger as a symbol of the corruption, greed, and violence of both Tweed and Tammany Hall. The gritty character of Nast’s neighborhood and his fascination with the fire company is discussed later in this essay, as is his connection to Tweed. Paine, *Thomas Nast*, pp. 12-14 on Nast chasing fire engines from Company Six; and William Alan Bales, *Tiger in the Streets*, (Dodd, Mead: New York, 1962), p. 28, 33, 45 regarding Tweed.

sketchbook seems to have been the only object of much interest to Nast in this period. Although he attended two German-speaking schools and an “academy” on Forty-Seventh Street, none could hold him for long. Nast’s parents hoped that he could become a better student, but their hopes were eternally frustrated. By 1854 Nast had convinced his parents that art was the only path for him.¹⁴

From this point on Nast studied drawing and painting. His first formal training was with Theodore Kaufmann, a German-American painter who taught young artists in his studio on Broadway. Paine implies that Kaufman took Nast as a pupil in part because of their shared German heritage. Although the German immigrant community in New York was large, widely distributed and constantly shifting, it was cohesive enough to support German-speaking schools and churches, bars and newspapers.¹⁵ These community organs suggest that Nast’s parents may have hoped for a friendly reception for their talented son. All his life, Nast struggled to be punctual, civil, and focused, but there is no mention of these challenges with regard to his study with Kauffman, who became Nast’s first mentor. Rather than a struggle, artistic study seems to have been pure pleasure for Nast. Kauffman taught Nast to copy great works in local museums and drew from life in the studio, and he seems to have made a few friends in the artistic

¹⁴ Given his lack of formal education, it is no surprise that Nast never became a highly literary person. The English language would pose a continuing challenge, even in correspondence. Writing in his terrible handwriting, he often made spelling and grammar errors. He was especially prone to spelling phonetically and to omitting words, such as in his 1863 letter to his wife, Sallie, written from a train. “I feel rather emty and think with pleasure that in a few minnits I will my lunch.” After his marriage, Nast increasingly relied on Sallie to write his letters, and her elegant handwriting is much more common in Nast papers than Nast’s own. That Nast knew his written English was poor – and that Sallie found his struggle to express himself endearing – is apparent in the same 1863 letter, in which he writes that “I know you love my mistake, and so I do not care.” See Thomas Nast to Sallie Edwards Nast, July 1, 1863, Huntington Manuscript #27750.

¹⁵ See Don Heinrich Tolzmann, *The German-American Experience* (Amherst, New York: Humanity Books, 2000), pp. 191-3, 397-8. German newspapers were numerous, but the most famous was the *New Yorker Staatszeitung*, published in New York by Oswald Ottendorfer and primarily concerned with neighborhood news, city and national politics. Other German cultural landmarks included the *Stadttheater*, which presented plays and concerts in German under German management, and the *Amerikanscher Arbeiterbund*, a German tradesmen’s union, which met in Mechanic’s Hall. Beer halls and German businesses were sprinkled all over the city, especially in Kleindeutschland, in the 10th, 11th, and 13th Wards, somewhat uptown from the Nast’s neighborhood. See Howard B. Furer, *The Germans In America* (New York: Oceana Publishing, Dobbs Ferry, 1973), pp. 39-43.

community there. He was learning techniques for drawing, painting, and composition from peers, masters, and the simple repetition of studio work.¹⁶

Lessons with Kauffman alone did not satisfy Nast for long, however. Like many artists, he sought training in a variety of venues. He moved on, first to other mentors, then to classes at the Academy of Design on Thirteenth Street.¹⁷ As part of his training, he and other students visited local museums and galleries, copying the paintings hanging there. Nast especially liked the paintings in the collection of Thomas Bryan, a wealthy New Yorker. Copying the works on his easel, Nast attracted admiring attention. Bryan noticed the young artist, and helped Nast earn pocket money by allowing him to collect the entrance fees of visitors. Nast enjoyed his training at the Academy, and his sideline at the museum was lucrative, but he sought a more permanent position with a steadier income and new artistic challenges.¹⁸

Nast's attention was captured by a new form of journalism, illustrated weeklies. These were like newspapers in their content and appearance, but they differed from newspapers in a few respects. First, they relied directly on illustration to supplement written content. Second, illustrated weeklies included fiction and poetry in addition to news. Finally, like magazines, the new weeklies were created to serve purposes other than disposable news delivery. For example, they frequently printed drawings, lithographs, and engravings which were intended for display on the

¹⁶ Some of these artists included Samuel Coleman, Eugene Benson, and Walter Shirlaw. According to the Census of 1855, there were 898 artists working in New York City, of whom 211 were German immigrants. Of the total, 589 were foreign-born. Thus, the artistic community into which Nast stepped was a fairly cosy one, and one in which a substantial majority shared Nast's immigrant past. See Robert Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City, 1825-1863* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1949), pp. 214-215, Table 27.

¹⁷ The National Academy of Design, founded in 1825, was a group of distinguished artists who pooled both their art and resources to create an American version of the English and French academies. These were schools where students could learn what was called the "academic" style of painting, and which presented new work by established and rising artists in annual exhibitions. Artists could be elected to membership, usually once they had achieved distinction in the field, and students like Nast could apply to become pupils of the Academy's school. See Cummings, Thomas S., *Historic Annals of the National Academy of Design* (Philadelphia: George W. Childs, 1865) and Clark, Eliot, *History of the National Academy of Design, 1825-1953* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953).

¹⁸ Paine, *Thomas Nast*, pp. 16-17. Other possible reasons for Nast's search for employment are discussed later in this essay.

walls of readers' homes, similar to today's poster art.¹⁹ Nevertheless, illustrated newspapers and magazines were directly concerned with news, and they printed sensational stories alongside domestic and foreign political affairs. Because of this ambiguity, and because contemporaries used the two terms interchangeably, the words magazine and newspaper will be applied as synonyms in reference to illustrated periodicals in this essay.

The first illustrated weekly newspapers, founded in 1851, were *Gleason's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion* and the *Illustrated American News*. Four years later, Gleason's employee Frank Leslie (born Henry Carter) started his paper, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated News*, on December 15, 1855.²⁰ Leslie's was to become an intensely popular paper, with circulation of 160,000 in 1860 and a sixty-year lifespan. It was only matched by *Harper's Weekly*, founded in 1857. However, when Nast noticed *Leslie's*, it was still brand-new, competing in an environment of cut-throat competition. *Leslie's Illustrated News* sold for ten cents, contained a variety of materials, and relied directly on illustration for its sensational content.²¹ Readers devoured the illustrations of city fires, scenes of local life, and portraits of dignitaries.

¹⁹ The use of printed images in private homes is well-known, but illustrated newspapers were printed on fairly inexpensive paper, in comparison to the high quality of Currier and Ives prints. It is initially difficult to imagine it surviving the process of cutting, pasting, and the rigors of nineteenth century life. Readers nonetheless cut out drawings they liked and pasted them up. Frank Leslie even made special accommodations for this, by warning readers to examine the paper thoroughly before cutting in order to catch any important text (which might be on the back of a picture and thus lost if it was cut out too soon), and by usually printing "stories and miscellaneous materials" on the back page of an illustration. See Budd Gambee, *Frank Leslie and His Illustrated Newspaper* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Department of Library Science, University of Michigan, 1964), p. 50.

²⁰ Frank Luther Mott, *History of American Magazines*, Vol. 2, (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 44. Budd Gambee's dissertation, later published as a book with most of its chapters excerpted (see note 19), provides a short biography of Leslie in pp. 39. Leslie, born in England, was raised in a solidly middle-class family. He was expected to follow in his father's footsteps, becoming a merchant, but essentially ran away to be an artist. His rebellion coincided with the rise of illustrated journalism in London, and he joined the staff of the *London Illustrated News*. From there, in 1853, he made his way to America. His artistic pseudonym at the *London Illustrated News* was "Frank Leslie," and when he emigrated he made it his legal name, plastering it onto each of his papers.

²¹ Mott, *History of American Magazines*, Vol. 2, 453. Gambee, p. 4, suggests that Leslie didn't intend his paper to be "sensational" in a prurient sense, like the Penny Press, but that his personality lent itself to coverage of what we now call human interest, and he learned early that crime stories were hot sellers. It must have been

Leslie's employed two kinds of men to create illustrations: artists and engravers. First, the artist would draw the scene, either from life or memory. Then, provided with the sketch, an engraver (or, later, a team of engravers) would carve the drawing onto a block of soft wood. This carved wood was used to print the illustration, and the skill required to carve it was substantial. Illustrations, then, were the product of a physical and creative interaction between artists and engravers. Both brought specialized skills to the print room. Frank Leslie, his newspaper growing constantly, was ever in need of talented young men to create illustrations for the paper. He recruited them from other periodicals, sought them among local artists, and hired them when they appeared on his doorstep. In 1855, Thomas Nast became one of those men, at the tender age of fifteen.

Even at the end of his life, Nast was proud of the way he talked his way into the job with Leslie. He simply presented himself to the owner, offered sample drawings to demonstrate his talent, and insisted on a job. Leslie hesitated, but allowed Nast to take on a trial assignment: drawing a ferry on a busy morning. James Parton, a historian and a cousin of Nast's wife, told Paine that Leslie never intended to hire Nast. Leslie told Parton that he "gave him the job merely for the purpose of bringing home to his youthful mind the absurdity of his application." Nast, however, surprised the editor, producing an excellent drawing with energy, exactitude, and engaging detail. Like most of the editors of his generation, Leslie was a man whose primary concern was profit. Recognizing Nast's talent, and unconcerned with his age, Leslie gave Nast a job immediately, paying four dollars a week.²²

With the job at *Leslie's*, Nast's childhood effectively ended. He would remain employed full time from 1855 until he left *Harper's Weekly* in 1887. It is here, then, that we can pause to examine

early, indeed, as the second issue of the paper, January 5, 1856, contained the following headlines: "A Female Found Dead," "Accidental Death," "Suicide of an Artist," "Christmas at Five Points," "Diabolic Murder in New Haven," and "Juvenile Fracas."

²² Paine, *Thomas Nast*, pp. 18-19. According to Gambee, Frank Leslie got his first job in almost exactly the same way as Nast. Although at the time Leslie was an adult, he apparently talked his way into a job with almost no qualifications save talent and ambition. Paine does not mention this, and perhaps didn't know it. Alternatively, Paine may be silent because Nast tended to emphasize his work for *Harper's Weekly*, rather than *Frank Leslie's*. But it suggests that Leslie might have been more sympathetic to the young German applicant than he admitted to James Parton.

critically the themes of Nast's version of his early life and its omissions. These themes are connected, and they are suggestive of some of the contradictions in his later work. Emphasized most powerfully are a set of ideals which Nast believed to be at the heart of the American Dream. Secondly, a romanticized version of Nast's immigrant community and his family undergird his narrative. Finally, the glaring omission of any open discussion of his family's religious faith and the ethnic content of his childhood neighborhood point toward the complexity of his later views regarding many ethnic, religious, and political groups.

For Nast, the American Dream was a tangible fact, not an interpretative framework. As his artwork was to make clear, he believed quite literally that an American had freedoms and opportunities denied to the vast majority of the world. He would have defined the American Dream with reference to these opportunities, much as he defined his own narrative by emphasizing them. The story of his childhood points directly to the possibilities available to immigrant children. Two examples illustrate this point. First, there is the question of Nast's literacy. He stated outright that he could speak no English when he arrived. Although his mother transferred young Nast into a German-speaking school, he never thrived academically. Rather than interpret this in negative terms – as confusing, frustrating, or limiting – Nast chose to emphasize instead his artistic talent. School was irrelevant, in this reading, because what mattered was Nast's ability to transform the vibrancy of the city around him into beautiful, commercially useful illustrations. Second, the confusion of the streets around him was made not threatening but exciting, not dangerous but stimulating. The scenes he witnessed on the street provided Nast the raw material necessary for any artist. The second section of this essay examines the reality of Nast's neighborhood, but what matters here is the optimistic approach Nast took to it in his memory. Rather than the scene of poverty, crime, and violence that it often was, he remembered it as the rich vein of experience from which he could draw to advance his own interests. Specifically, his practice of following fire wagons points to this interpretation, because rather than remembering the devastation of fire in a neighborhood of wooden homes, Nast recalled the excitement of running after the wagons, the heroism of the firemen, and the pleasure of creating drawings of their

exploits.²³ Clearly, a powerful sense of opportunity and optimism suffused Nast's personal narrative. It was central to how he understood his own childhood, and how he explained his rise from obscurity to fame and wealth.

By emphasizing the opportunity available in America, Nast did not completely erase his own immigrant experience. Instead, he controlled it by romanticizing it. The fears we can imagine accompanying a new school, a foreign language, and a new group of classmates were managed by telling the amusing story of Nast's undeserved spanking. The classic immigrant problem of housing – overcrowding, dirt, danger from the environment and one's neighbors – was retold as an exciting environment full of kindly strangers. Nast left out his immediate neighbors in favor of emphasizing his relationships with prominent German artists like Theodore Kaufman. Likewise, he chose not to remember the angry clashes between immigrants and "native" Americans, emphasizing instead his role as protégé to the wealthy art collector Thomas Bryan. To be a German immigrant was to buy German cakes at the corner store, to attend a German school, and to apprentice with a German master artist. This romantic memory re-wrote Nast's familial situation, as well. The absence of Nast's father seems to have been hardly any trouble at all, and his return is couched in terms which elide any dislocation, resentment, or confusion. The frustration Nast's parents must have felt with his failure at school was explained away almost humorously, with the Nast parents simply capitulating to Thomas's artistic interests.²⁴ Any hint of tension, poverty, or obstruction of Nast's artistic destiny was erased. For a reader of Paine's biography, this might be less obvious if Nast's family made any appearance in his later life. After his marriage in 1861, however, they simply disappear from the story, never to be seen again. Nast's father's death in 1858 or

²³ Buildings in Lower Manhattan, where William Street crosses through the Wall Street neighborhood and almost reaches the Lower East Side, burned repeatedly. In 1776, a great fire burned most of Broadway. In 1835, a huge fire burned much of the financial district and Ward 3. Lower Greenwich Street was rebuilt as a warehouse district after the fire, helping us to determine that Nast and his family must have lived in the upper reaches of the street, which remained residential longer. In 1845, just a year before Nast's arrival, a fire burned through Wall Street, Water, Street, and most of the eastern tip of the island (Ward 2), including the southernmost tip of William Street. Had Nast walked three or four blocks south on his own street, he would have encountered rebuilding made necessary by the devastation of fire in a city built largely in wood. Eric Homburger, *The Historical Atlas of New York City* (New York: H. Holt & Co. 1994), pp. 56, 78-79.

²⁴ Paine, *Thomas Nast*, p. 15.

1859 is mentioned but merits no comment, and even in Nast's personal papers, there is almost no mention of any family member for the rest of his life.²⁵ The contrast between his idyllic description of his childhood and this erasure is intriguing, but unexplained.²⁶

This romantic view of life as an immigrant, both in relation to the community as a whole and to his own family, is nothing new. One reason that biographies and autobiographies are often suspect as historical evidence is that they tend to emphasize success and reward rather than failure and want. But for artists, self-presentation, even in the suspect medium of auto/biography, is an important component of artistic vision. Art is usually interpreted both on its own terms and in relation to the perspective of the artist as a human being and a citizen.²⁷ In Nast's case, this points to the most glaring omission of his narrative: religion. Later in Nast's

²⁵ A photocopied newspaper article in the collection of Nast materials at the Morristown Free Public Library states that the Nast family intended to live in New York City but "ultimately, this plan was changed and a home was made in the middle West." This is the only reference to the Nast family in later years, and it is incomplete in that no newspaper is identified and no date is given. In the spring of 1860, while in England, Nast repaid a loan by the boxer John Heenan by giving him a draft for \$100 on Nast's mother. This was in case the *New York Illustrated News* failed to pay Heenan money it owed Nast. Heenan tore up the draft, but the story indicates that not only was Nast's mother still in New York at that time, she was in possession of his savings or of family money on which Nast felt he could draw. See Paine, *Thomas Nast*, p. 44. In an 1860 diary kept while touring Germany, Nast describes his visits with family members in Landau. Nast seems to have been hoping that an elderly aunt would make him her heir. He was unsure, however, that she actually had any money, or if she did how much. In the end, he found that the endless round of afternoon visits and beer hall nights was tedious, and he moved on. The only hint that his emotions were engaged was in his visit to his father's old band hall, where he was moved to think that his father had walked through the same gates. Diary in the collection of the Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Library, GA-33-TN, Box 1 "Diaries" file, see entries for December 21 through December 24, 1860.

²⁶ Sociologists who embrace biography, or "life stories," as a methodology point to the problem of internal consistency as one which indicates "tension of change in interpretation." Thus an inconsistency, which might be interpreted as a lapse in autobiographical or biographical narrative, becomes a source of insight into the retelling of the subject's story. The absence of any information regarding Nast's family, either from Paine, Nast, or any other source, is both frustrating and suggestive. See Brian Roberts, *Biographical Research* (Buckingham, England: Open University Press, 2002), p. 40.

²⁷ For examples of this tendency, see Draper Hill, *Mr. Gillray: The Caricaturist* (London: Phaidon Press, 1965); Stanley Wintraub, *Whistler, A Biography* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1974); Silverberg, Miriam, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: the Search for Sacred Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000).

life, religion became vitally important, especially to his attacks on Irish immigrants and Roman Catholics of all nationalities. To understand his drawings, and to interpret his opposition to Catholic Americans, it would be helpful to know Nast's religious history. There are two hints in Paine's account that suggest that the Nast family was Roman Catholic. First, an early anecdote Nast related to Paine includes a scene Nast observed while at Mass and, second, a later passage notes that Nast disliked German school because he was required to confess. He "regard[ed] his sins as too many and too dark for the confidences of the priest's box." Nast's rejection of the scholarship and discipline of school may also have manifested in his rejection of Catholic doctrine and practice. Paine relates a tale from 1850 in which Nast snuck out of church to cut an interesting poster off a nearby wall.²⁸ Nast's neighborhood, discussed in detail below, was a mixture of nationalities, religions and ethnicities, but the vast majority of his neighbors were Irish Catholics. If his own religion was the same as theirs, what was his contact with the Irish population? These are difficult questions to answer in light of the spotty evidence. If Nast's parents were Roman Catholic, and if Nast was raised in the church, he gave no sign of sympathy with it later in life.²⁹ His wife, Sallie, was Episcopalian, and her religious tradition seems to have prevailed in their home. Nast's attacks on Catholics, and the possible effect of his own early Catholicism on them, are subjects too complex for this essay. What suffices is the fact that two of the most personal aspects of his early life were ruthlessly minimized in his life story. What follows is a description of the neighborhood as we now know it to have been, and the picture is very different from the one Nast painted.

²⁸ Paine, *Thomas Nast*, p. 6, writes that Nast observed a nasty incident "at a Catholic Church," but does not specify whether Nast was there as a congregant. On page 12 he relates the story of the poster on Sunday, and on page 14 the confessional story.

²⁹ Thomas Nast was not the first man of his name to achieve fame in the United States. Wilhelm Nast, a Methodist missionary and editor of a German-language Methodist newspaper, made a place for himself in America in the early nineteenth century. As far as I can determine, there is no relation between Wilhelm Nast and Thomas Nast. No reference to the elder exists in Nast's papers or in Paine, and I have seen no suggestion by any Nast scholar that the two might be related. There remains the possibility, however, that Thomas Nast was, in some way, related to Wilhelm, and therefore that the Nast family had some connection to early German Methodism. See Tolzmann, p. 229.

The Neighborhood

Emigration to the United States was often difficult and confusing. Settling into a new neighborhood, surrounded by unfamiliar languages and customs of every sort, could be even worse for a small boy. The two homes Nast occupied from 1846 until 1855 provide vivid examples of the dynamic environment into which he had been thrust. The first neighborhood, surrounding the Greenwich Street house, was somewhat genteel, but the Nasts occupied it for only a short time. The second, near the northern end of William Street, plunged Nast into a teeming jungle of crime, commerce, and colorful humanity. Surrounding William Street was a culture of immigrants: Irish, German, Italian, Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant.

The first Nast home in New York is identified only as a house on Greenwich Street, which Paine says was lined with "respectable dwellings."³⁰ Greenwich Street is quite long, stretching from Second Place, almost at Manhattan's southern tip, all the way north to 14th Street, almost fifty blocks today. If one were to walk the street from its southern origin all the way to its terminus, one would pass through the Financial District, Battery Park City, TriBeCa, and the far western boundaries of Little Italy and SoHo, finally arriving in the West Village. Neither Nast nor Paine specified where along diverse Greenwich Street the Nasts settled. Given the fire of 1835, which burned much of lower Greenwich Street, and the rural nature of New York above Chambers Street, where City Hall is today, it seems likely that they found a house in the middle of Greenwich Street, closer to Wall Street than to the Battery.³¹ Typical Greenwich Street homes, usually built of wood and standing a little more than two stories high, were disappearing in the 1840's. The advent of iron building materials, and the expanding wealth and commerce of the city, led to a building boom for warehouses and factories, many centered on Greenwich Street. The fire of 1835 had wiped out many of the residential buildings of this area, leading landowners to re-build larger and more commercially useful structures with newer materials. As a result, the Nasts likely found their new neighborhood rather unwelcoming for small children. The number of residential properties diminished with every year, and the streets were increasingly busy with horse-drawn traffic, both passenger and

³⁰ Paine, *Thomas Nast*, p. 9.

³¹ Regarding the character of Greenwich Street and the fires of 1835 and 1845, see Homberger, p. 78.

freight. Nast explained their move to William Street partially in terms of his mother's search for a German language school, but it may also have related to this tension between the older nature of the Greenwich Street neighborhood and its growing commercial atmosphere.³²

A second possibility for the residence at Greenwich Street is suggested by Howard B. Furer in his book on German America. In the 1850s, Germans established boardinghouses on Greenwich Street. Here, poor or destitute immigrants sought temporary housing while they found work. It is possible that Mrs. Nast moved her family into an earlier version of these boardinghouses, which would explain the move to William Street. However, there are reasons to think this unlikely. First, Paine clearly implies that Appolonia Nast obtained a house, and that the area was more genteel than poor. However, he makes the same claim about William Street, with only partial accuracy. Second, it is unclear exactly when these boardinghouses appeared, but they may not have been available on Greenwich Street in the 1840s, when German immigration was considerably slower than in the late forties and early 1850s. Because of the rapid change in the street, its residential spaces may still have been single family occupied when Mrs. Nast arrived. Finally, the fact that Thomas Nast was placed in school immediately suggests that Mrs. Nast was prepared to settle permanently on Greenwich Street, something that is not consistent with life in a boardinghouse. Overall, it seems more likely that she moved into a small home and then sought a new one when the school and street proved unsatisfactory.³³

William Street, by contrast, was a genial mix of residential, artisanal, and small industrial use.³⁴ Paine says that the Nasts found a house on William Street near Frankfort, a cross-town artery now

³² Homburger, *Historical Atlas*, pp. 70-81, and for Nast's version of the move, Paine, *Thomas Nast*, p. 10.

³³ Furer, *The Germans In America*, p. 42.

³⁴ For example, Nast identified the man next door as a crayon-maker for artists (p. 10), and an engraving at the Museum of the City of New York (MCNY) shows a window shade maker in this area. Also at the MCNY, an engraving shows a row of shops on William Street between Fulton and John Sts., in 1845. Here, we see shops selling "Paris Fancy Goods," "Saddlery Hardware," dry goods, a lamp manufacturer, and a paint store for artists. In the early nineteenth century, Delmonico's restaurant opened on William Street between Beaver Street and Mill Street. It burned in 1835, but was reconstructed and re-opened in 1837, where it remained until 1890. See Gayle, Margot, "New York's Changing Scene," in *Sunday News Magazine*, March 25, 1979, no page number, in the William Street file of the MCNY.

paralleling the Brooklyn Bridge.³⁵ William is one of the oldest streets in New York, formerly called Smith Street, and it stretches from South Street, along the East River, up to Beekman Street, ending in a “T” with Spruce Street.³⁶ Frankfort is one block north of Spruce, so we can assume that the Nast house would have been near the end of William Street, just southeast of Park Row, where City Hall now stands. Six blocks south was Wall Street, center of New York’s financial district, and a few blocks north was Franklin Square, the center of newspaper production for the city.³⁷ Broadway, then as now one of the most important streets in the city, was two blocks west, and in either direction it offered a wealth of the city’s most innovative delights, including shopping at the new “department” store.³⁸ The German artist Kauffman’s studio was on Broadway, and the Academy of Design was at Thirteenth Street, just off Broadway. Most importantly, most threateningly, was the slum Five Points, which lurked one block west and five north, well within walking distance of a small boy.

It is unclear exactly when Nast moved to William Street, but Paine implied that it was soon after the family arrived in New York. He was certainly there when his father returned in 1850. The story of his father’s return is useful to illustrate, in part, the way Nast edited his past for history. As Nast told the story, his mother

³⁵ Paine, *Thomas Nast*, p. 10.

³⁶ William Street actually had several informal names in addition to its final one. It began as Shoemaker’s Lane, and was famous for the horrible smells caused in the tanning process. Later, it was called Smith Street, King George Street, and William Street, the last named for William III of England. In 1744 the street was officially named William Street to minimize confusion. See “New Doings in Shoemaker’s Lane,” a pamphlet of the National City Bank of New York, in the William Street file of the MCNY.

³⁷ Among the newspapers on Park Row, William Street, and in Franklin Square were the *Staats-Zeitung und Herald*, the *New York World*, the *New York Sun*, the *New York Tribune*, *The New York Times*, the *Evening Journal*, and *The New York Herald*. *Harper’s Weekly* and the Harper publishing business were located there after 1853. See Robert C. Boardman, “Newspaper Row Loses Last Paper,” September 14, 1954, in the William Street file of the MCNY. This article is likely from the *New York Times*, but there is no attribution in the clipping.

³⁸ This store, founded by A.T. Stewart in 1848, was also known as the Marble Palace. It occupied a corner lot at Broadway and Chambers Street. In 1862, Stewart moved his store to Broadway and 9th Avenue. See Robert Hendrickson, *Grand Emporiums: The Illustrated History of America’s Great Department Stores* (New York: Stein and Day, 1981), and William Lancaster, *The Department Store: A Social History* (Leicester, England: Leicester University Press, 1995). The Marble Palace features prominently in Elaine Abelson’s work on women and consumerism, as well. See Elaine Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

knew that his father was coming, and sent her son for a celebratory cake. Thomas bought the cake at the bakery on the corner, and was returning with it when he was accosted in the street. A strange carriage pulled out of traffic, a man leapt out and grabbed Nast, dragging him into the carriage and clasping him tightly. Initially, Nast was terrified, and also concerned about the cake, which was squished between them. He realized after a moment, however, that the man was his father, and they arrived home together. In Paine's telling, this story is a charming one, with the ruined cake, the tender father, and the reunited family. But it also betrays some of the pleasures and anxieties which must have affected life on William Street.³⁹

Young Thomas's errand sent him down the street to a German baker for cake his father would enjoy – something to remind him of Bavaria. We already know from Paine that Mrs. Nast chose her home for its German-friendly neighborhood, but it is worth examining the businesses and residents on William and surrounding streets to see exactly what kind of immigrant world young Nast encountered on his brief walk to obtain his mother's cake. Commercially, socially, and politically, it was a world dominated by immigrants and the working poor. Reading Paine's book in 1904, a reader might have found Nast's reunion with his father charming and funny. But the element of fear was real, and it is worth a second look. With Five Points only a few blocks away, no child on William Street could be ignorant of the dangers surrounding him.

The baker on the corner probably served a clientele almost exclusively of Germans. He may even have chosen his building specifically to be near William Street, or even one side of the street. This was because the immigrant communities of the lower East Side, especially near the central junction known as Five Points, tended to cluster by ethnicity, religion, and even point of origin. Entire buildings, sides of any given street, or whole blocks were often given over to a single ethnic immigrant group. The dominant group was the Irish, comprising more than two thirds of the area's inhabitants. Native-born Americans were only about ten percent of the adult population. Germans numbered almost fifteen percent, while small numbers of Italians, English, Poles, Scots, and

³⁹ Paine, *Thomas Nast*, pp 12-13.

non-German Jews made up the rest.⁴⁰ Among German immigrants, there were two differences which mattered. First was religion, which divided the group into three parts: Jews (about half of the German-speaking population), Catholics, and Protestants. Second was region, with most of the Jews originating in a part of what is now Poland but was then Prussian territory, but with more than half of the Christian Germans originating from either Baden-Wurttemberg or Hanover. Nast's family, from Bavaria, was among the smaller group of Christian Germans originating in Bavaria, Saxony, and Westphalia.⁴¹ So the German baker from whom Nast bought his cake might easily have chosen to establish his business on that particular corner for the same reason that Mrs. Nast chose to live on William Street: there was a populous German-speaking community there, and it was growing all the time.⁴²

Germans first came in large numbers to what became the United States in the eighteenth century, but by the early nineteenth century, they remained a small minority of American citizens. During the next one hundred years, by contrast, the population of German-speaking Americans, mostly immigrants, but also their children, would explode. In 1854, the peak of the wave, more than 200,000 Germans joined the American population.⁴³ That year was

⁴⁰ Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points : the 19th-century New York City Neighborhood that Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and became the World's Most Notorious Slum* (New York: Free Press, 2001), pp. 43-45.

⁴¹ Anbinder, *Five Points*, pp. 45-48.

⁴² In 1855, according to the US census, there were 1,987 German bakers in New York. Other occupations, in descending order of frequency, were: tailor (6,709), servant (4,493), "food dealer" (3,045), clerk (2,249), cabinetmaker (2,153), and laborer (1,870). Over forty-five thousand Germans worked in New York, representing 47% of the total immigrant population. By contrast, although the Irish were employed at a slightly higher rate (50%, which was the highest recorded for any immigrant group in the census), the number of Irish laborers was 17,426, out of a total of 19,783 in New York. Irish domestic servants numbered 23,386 to the city's 29,470. This distinction between a German propensity for artisanal work with higher pay and greater opportunity for the accumulation of wealth and the Irish dominance of laboring and service work was doubtless visible on the streets, where the marks of a man or woman's work were usually visible in his or her dress and workplace. So not only might Nast have witnessed the variety of immigrant experiences, he could hardly have missed the lesson that some immigrants were blessed with far greater advantages than others. Perhaps it was this comparison which initially tinted his memories rosy, since in contrast to the lives of many Irish immigrants, his family's experience was relatively easy. See Ernst, *Immigrant Life*, p. 213, Table 26, pp. 214-215, Table 27, and p. 219.

⁴³ John A. Hawgood, *The tragedy of German-America; the Germans in the United States of America during the nineteenth century--and after*. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1940), pp. 55-58, gives the number for 1854 as 215,000. Robert

the peak not only of pre-Civil War German immigration, but also of immigration by refugees of the Revolutions of 1848 in Europe. Although they are often called "Forty-Eighters," and so they called themselves, many of these immigrants came after the wave of revolutionary conflicts.⁴⁴ Nast and his family were among the first to leave, having been warned of the coming conflict and unwilling to be hostages to fate. Others delayed, more committed to social and political change or fearful of leaving their homeland. Beginning in 1850, many Germans who fought for liberal reforms, especially in Bavaria and Prussia, abandoned their fatherland for the friendlier shores of America. Thus, when Nast arrived in New York, it was to a thriving and growing German community, but as he aged, that community grew enormously.⁴⁵

Not only did the total number of Germans grow in the early 1850s, the tenor of German-American life in New York shifted as well. The Forty-Eighters, as they arrived in the existing German community, immediately began to assert their moral, political, and social leadership. In contrast to the early German community, which spoke Low German and derived from the working and farming classes, the Forty-Eighters spoke High German, held university degrees, and believed themselves to possess moral authority as a result of their fight for liberal values in Germany. Indeed, they had to exploit these advantages because many of them had no other skills with which to make a living in America.⁴⁶

Henry Billigmeier, *Americans From Germany: A Study in Cultural Diversity*.

(Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1974), p. 79, says that the total German immigration number for 1854 was 230,000.

⁴⁴ See Carl Wittke, *Refugees of Revolution: The German Forty-Eighters in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1952), p. 3.

⁴⁵ James F. Harris, "The Arrival of the Europamude: Germans in America after 1848," in *German Forty-Eighters in America*, Charlotte Brancaforte, editor, (New York: P. Lang, 1989), pp. 1-3. Harris gives the total number of German emigrants between 1845 and 1854 as one million. Of these, he estimates that 670,800 arrived in the United States between 1850 and 1854, demonstrating the delay between 1848 and the arrival of the wave of German immigration. However, it is important to note that most of those immigrants were not refugees of the Revolution of 1848. Harris describes them using the term "Europamude," which translates as people who were "tired of Europe" and who were frustrated by its reliance on tradition. These immigrants rejected the traditionalism against which the Forty-eighters fought, but they rejected it in favor not of Liberal political values but of a generalized embrace of the new (Harris, p. 2). See also Theodore S. Hamerow, "The Two Worlds of the Forty-Eighters," in *The German Forty-Eighters in the United States* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), pp. 19-21.

⁴⁶ Wittke, p. 24; James M. Bergquist, "The Forty-Eighters: Catalysts of German-American Politics," in *The German-American Encounter: Conflict and Cooperation*

For the existing German-American community, however, the arrogant superiority of the Forty-Eighters was provocative. Rival newspapers, political positions, and neighborhood landmarks delineated the conflict between the older Germans in New York and the new arrivals. Thomas Nast, by this time engaged in his art education and constantly on the prowl for new images and ideas, must have observed the tension. Even if he ignored the political and literary exchanges, which was possible given his youth and poor reading skills, he would have seen the massive growth in population, the creation of leftist political clubs, and the parades staged by Forty-Eighters in support of their ideals.⁴⁷

Socially, the neighborhood around William Street was as diverse as its population, yet it still reflected the challenges of the immigrant experience. William Street seems to have been somewhat more genteel than the streets immediately north of it, but it was within easy walking distance (only a few blocks) of the most terrible slums in America, Five Points.⁴⁸ For many immigrants, arriving at Castle Gardens with almost nothing (or, in the case of some Irish immigrants, absolutely nothing), it was in this neighborhood that they found cheap rents and readily available, albeit low paying jobs. Immigrants with slightly more money often chose to remain close to these neighborhoods, remaining connected to an ethnic enclave while living a few blocks away in a slightly nicer area. Thus, the immigrant experience could encompass a variety of lifestyles while remaining connected geographically, culturally, and economically. Even if Mrs. Nast managed to obtain a house of her own, and even if she had enough money to keep her family in relative comfort, she was surrounded

between Two Cultures, 1800-2000, Frank Trommler and Elliott Shore, eds. (New York: Berghann Books, 2001), pp. 22-36; Hildegard Binder Johnson, "Adjustment to the United States," in *The Forty-Eighters: Political Refugees of the German Revolution of 1848*, A.E. Zucker, editor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), pp. 43-78.

⁴⁷ Don Heinrich Tolzmann, *The German-American Experience*, (New York: Humanity Books, 2000), pp. 228-231.

⁴⁸ William Street's seeming gentility did not totally exclude the violence and dangers of the neighborhood. In 1856, just after Nast began work for Frank Leslie, the newspaper reported a "Shocking Murder" on William Street. A German dance hall, operated from number 231, was the scene of an altercation on New Year's Day. When Martin Kames was ejected from the hall, he returned after a short interval and provoked a knife fight with the man who opened the door to his knock, William Ruff. Kames' knife cut Ruff's throat, killing him. Not only did this murder occur on Nast's street, it was reported by his employer. See *Frank Leslie's Illustrated News*, vol. 1 no. 5 (January 12, 1856).

by examples of the possibilities and perils of immigration. In addition to the artisans and factories mentioned previously, washerwomen, rag-pickers, alcoholics, and beggars shared the streets just north of William Street with prostitutes, pick-pockets, and other petty criminals.⁴⁹ Frankfort Street, slashing east/west on a northbound angle from the river, might have provided a partial barrier to this terrible scene of deprivation and vice, but it did not keep little Thomas Nast from roaming.⁵⁰

What might he have seen? We know of several places he walked through references in Paine's biography. First, Nast was once caught trying to cut a poster off of the wall of a brick building. This incident occurred at the corner of Houston and Eldridge streets. Second, Nast remembered admiring the lithograph of a tiger's head, the same tiger used by Engine Company Number Six, in a shop on the corner of James and Madison streets.⁵¹ The Company itself, informally known as "Big Six," occupied a brownstone on Hester Street near Gouverneur Street.⁵² We also

⁴⁹ For an example of the crime in Nast's neighborhood, see *Frank Leslie's Illustrated News*. For example, in the February 25, 1856 edition: "Successful Burglary and Robbery," "Charge of Gambling," "Charge of False Pretences," in the section "Police Intelligence." *Harper's Weekly*, not content merely to report crime, mixed it with bizarre descriptions of Chinese culture, reporting on its cover that the consumption of opium was becoming epidemic in New York because of imports from Asia. See *Harper's Weekly*, May 23, 1857, pages 321-322.

⁵⁰ On the poor and criminal in surrounding streets, see Anbinder, *Five Points*, pp. 72-105. Lithographic and newspaper references at the Museum of the City of New York show William Street as relatively prosperous and safe, with well-dressed residents and plenty of commercial activity. Other illustrations show streets only a few blocks away as the vilest centers of depravity. These lithographs, however, fall into two categories, which helps to explain the differences between them. First, represented by those of William Street, are the images intended as advertisements or idyllic, postcard-like pictures. We can see those qualities in these images because not only is there no loafing, no crime, and no illicit activity, there are no animals, no dirt, and not very much of anything else. The street seems artificially empty. The lithographs of Five Points, by contrast, were usually created in the service of outraged newspaper or magazine stories about the depravities and sufferings of the slum-dwellers. In this case, they over-emphasize the brawling, drinking, and sexual license of the inhabitants. Between the two is probably a middle ground where we can imagine young Thomas Nast, observing much of the negative but enjoying the pleasures of the positive.

⁵¹ Paine, *Thomas Nast*, pp. 11-12 refers to both of these locations.

⁵² The company known as the "Big Six" derived from a previously dissolved fire company also called Engine Company Number Six. The company was re-formed in 1849 under the leadership of a group of local men, including John C. Reilly and William M. Tweed, but its first location is unclear. The Hester Street house was occupied in 1854, when Nast was 14 years old. The neighborhood served by the Engine Company was bounded by the river (and South Street) to the east, Grand

know that Nast attended art classes with Theodore Kauffman, whose studio on Broadway required Nast to cross Park Row, about four blocks, and then travel along Broadway a few blocks. The Academy of Art, at 13th Street, was a far longer distance, closer to twenty-five blocks. In walking to the Academy of Art, Nast traversed practically the entire north/south axis of the city.

In this space, between Broadway to the West and 13th Street to the North, bounded by the river on the East, Nast could have witnessed practically everything for which New York was famous. On Park Row, three or four blocks west, he could walk past lovely brick homes occupied by genteel families. Gradually, wealthy New Yorkers were moving uptown, but in the 1840s and 1850s, plenty of impressive homes remained the property of the well-to-do. Crossing Chambers Street towards what is now Foley Square would have taken Nast into Five Points, however, a very different atmosphere. Filthy, crime-ridden, and prone to disastrous fires, Five Points was coming to symbolize the slum for all city-dwellers. It was the center, as well, of Democratic politics among Irish New Yorkers, and it therefore contained all the detritus of nineteenth century political life. Nast could have seen handbills and party stump speakers, bars where political patronage was distributed, and newly arrived immigrants in the care of party operatives who would escort them to housing in exchange for political support.⁵³ Between these two extremes lay the vast majority of the neighborhood, immigrant and native-born alike. Business owners and workers traveled New York's streets daily, on their way to and from work, selling goods and services. Nast could have observed various artisans at work, including shoemakers, bakers, tanners, and printers. He could have purchased almost any commodity in almost any quantity, if he had money of his own to spend. In short, he lived at the beating heart of New York's growing commercial power.

That heart rarely rested easy during Nast's childhood. The anecdote Nast told about his father's return from the sea recounted his terror at being snatched from the street by what he took to be a

Street to the north, Catherine Street to the south, and Bowery, or 4th Avenue, to the west. The station likely stayed within those bounds from 1849 until the organization of municipal fire companies in 1865, and was never very far from Nast's home on William Street. Paine, *Thomas Nast*, p. 11, says the engine company was "less than a dozen blocks away."

⁵³ See Anbinder, *Five Points*, pp. 48-50 and chapters three and five, passim. The literature on Tammany Hall, cited in note 58, also addresses this political culture.

stranger. His fear, while minimized by Paine, must have been very real because danger, whether from stranger, neighbor or friend, was a constant presence on and near William Street. Nativist riots, race riots, drunken brawls, and simple crime would have been familiar concerns for the Nast family.⁵⁴ One explanation of Nast's silence regarding the darker side of his neighborhood would be that he rarely experienced it. If this were true, he would hardly be expected to dwell on it in his memories. However, it is hard to imagine that this was so. We already know that Nast was obliged to walk several blocks to school, to art classes, and on errands for his mother. The Academy of Art was far uptown, in a city which virtually ended at what is now mid-town. It was quite a walk for a young boy, even in the nineteenth century, when walking was both a necessity and a pastime. So Nast was definitely in the streets during the day. He also remembered experiences which suggest a familiarity with street life at other times. For example, he loved to chase fire trucks as they sped toward emergencies, and to draw their exploits. Not all of these could have been in broad daylight, and Nast would have been in school during those hours, anyway. So he must have chased fire trucks either on weekends or in the early morning and early evening hours. These were the same times that saw workingmen going to and from their jobs, stopping at taverns, and generally enjoying city life. Another suggestion that Nast had some familiarity with the streets is his tale about how he convinced Frank Leslie to employ such a young man. In that story, Nast walks through the still-dark streets to the ferry landing, waiting as dawn breaks. He draws in the landing, the buildings

⁵⁴ In 1834-5, residents of Five Points and surrounding streets rioted three times, first in reaction to an election controversy, second against the abolitionist sentiments of local activists, targeting African-Americans living on the lower east side, and third in an expression of the tension between local native-born Americans and immigrant Catholics. In later years, violence was a constant threat in political interaction, for example in 1845, when a gang of thugs broke into a Tammany Hall meeting and forced the revision of a resolution on Texas. Riots could also occur over cultural events, as in 1849, when the dueling Shakespeare interpretations of Macready and Forrest led to riots that burned the Park Theatre. On the 1849 riot, see Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow, Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1988). On the 1834-5, see Anbinder, *Five Points*, p. 27 and pp. 141-144. Anbinder's discussion of street crime and the perils of drink can be found throughout, but especially on pages 20-27, and 72-105. Nativist political and social sentiments were continually expressed in political debates and party publications, as well. See Anthony Gronowicz, *Race and Class Politics in New York City Before the Civil War* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), pp. 109-112.

around it, and the static detail of the scene, waiting for the hour when people will rush to board the boat. Only then, in a flurry of activity, does he add the human life which makes the drawing so pleasing. What might Nast have seen, creeping through the dark streets, sitting, and waiting at the dock?

While we cannot know exactly what Nast saw, it seems extremely unlikely that he was unaware of the teeming human jungle which surrounded him. Uptown, wealthy New Yorkers felt sufficiently threatened by the slums of Five Points, the crime of the lower-east side, and the questionable business practices of the commercial interests there that they reached out in both regulatory and charitable enterprises.⁵⁵ How much more pressing would those problems have seemed to a young mother and her small son? But, of course, the impression Nast gives, especially in pointing to the excitement of fires and his pleasure in drawing, is that he was less afraid of the streets than thrilled by them. So, while we should see his experience with his father's return as a hint of the very real danger that surrounded him, we should also recognize the seductive power of that danger for a youngster whose primary interest in life was the visual representation of the world around him. The Nast who struggled to escape a stranger's unexpected embrace was a vulnerable child in a very tough neighborhood, but the Nast who chased the Big Six was a burgeoning visual journalist who embraced the world around him enthusiastically.

What place did the Nast family occupy in this maelstrom of immigrant and native culture? Amid so much change, especially in the Nasts' economic status, determining the Nasts' class is difficult, but it may help to explain why Nast went to work so young. Nast explained his move to Frank Leslie's employ in terms of the seizure of opportunity. However, other factors may also have pushed him toward earning a living, especially in the difficult

⁵⁵ On charitable efforts in the United States, there is a substantial historiography. See, as recent examples, Lawrence J. Friedman and, Mark D. McGarvie, eds. *Charity, Philanthropy and Civility in American History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), and Kathleen D. McCarthy, *American Creed: Philanthropy and the Rise of Civil Society, 1700-1865* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). The disorder and ineffectiveness of early efforts at charity were only remedied much later. See Joan Waugh, *Unsentimental Reformer: The Life of Josephine Shaw Lowell* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). A brief sketch of these charitable activities is provided by Homberger, p. 86. One example of the questionable practices which alarmed genteel New Yorkers was the operation of railroads and omnibuses on Sunday. James Harper, publisher and brother of Fletcher Harper (Nast's mentor at *Harper's Weekly*) tried to stop this practice while he was mayor, but failed. See Gronowicz, p. 110.

economic climate of the late 1850s. Joseph Nast was one of a small number of professional musicians in New York. Nast mentions his father's employment at various music halls and his work with a house band, but does not say whether Joseph Nast obtained steady employment or only freelance and seasonal work. There is no indication that Mrs. Nast worked to support her family, although the years between Joseph Nast's departure from Landau and his return to the family in New York may have required her to find some income. Most lower-class women worked, especially in Five Points, as washerwomen, cooks, seamstresses and salesgirls. Many worked in wealthy homes as domestic servants while others were prostitutes, dancers, and thieves. For a married woman to work was a telling marker of working-class status. Even if Appolonia never worked, Nast would have seen working women every day, and could easily have contrasted their lives with those of wealthier, more leisured women on Park Row or at Burton's Theater. Nast is nearly silent regarding the family's finances, but his interest in earning money at the door of Mr. Bryan's museum, and his aggressive approach to Frank Leslie, suggest that even if the family had enough money at home, Nast could expect little in the way of support as he grew older, and no pocket money.

In Landau, he might not have noticed the lack so much, but New York was full of young boys with money to spend. The largest and most famous group were the newsboys, who spread their product throughout the city on foot. Picking up papers first thing in the morning, these boys sold their stock by shouting out the headlines, and could earn as much as one dollar per day. Newsboys developed routines, including eating in restaurants and frequenting plays and musicals at local venues. Many were orphans, living on the street entirely without adult supervision. While newsboys were a highly visible example of young workers, they were only one of several groups Nast might have observed. Immigrant children frequently worked, selling fruit, picking rags, or serving domestically. Older children, both immigrant and native-born, worked as apprentices in shops and factories. For Nast, these children may have provided role models, suggesting that work was something he need not wait to commence.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Regarding child workers, including newsboys, see Anbinder, *Five Points*, pp. 129-133. Frank Leslie referenced these children in his second issue of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated News*. Complaining about blocked streets, he pointed to the crowds of "thousands of girls and boys employed in the innumerable manufacturing

Even if the Nast family was relatively prosperous, the timing of Nast's entry into the working world is suggestive of economic hardship. In the account Paine provides, there is little indication of why, suddenly, Nast abandoned his artistic training and his job for Mr. Bryan to join the staff at *Leslie's*. Perhaps, given the magazine's recent appearance, Nast simply sought a new opportunity. However, Paine and James Parton, Nast's wife's cousin, both suggest that Nast and Leslie found the idea of a fifteen year-old artist unlikely.⁵⁷ What could have motivated Nast to make such a surprising offer to the entrepreneur? One possible answer is the economic trouble New York endured beginning in 1854. At the end of that year, a downturn in the economy led to layoffs, reduced wages, and widespread privation. This was especially pressing among the city's poorest residents in Five Points, but laborers all over the city suffered. It was in the following year, with few jobs available and a depressed local economy that Nast sought out Leslie. In 1858/9, with the death of Joseph Nast, the value of young Nast's income must have become even more important. The cause of death is not given, but if Joseph had been ill for some time, unemployment might have joined with the general economic malaise to force Nast to work.⁵⁸

In need of money, whether from youthful desire or family necessity, and surrounded by scenes he was eager to draw, Nast sought employment within the blossoming world of illustrated journalism. In later life, Nast de-emphasized his immigrant experience and minimized the rough-and-tumble nature of his childhood. But when we examine it in detail, the links between what he saw in youth and what he drew later are unmistakable. Nast did not simply emerge from the streets as an illustrator, he brought their sights and sounds with him to *Leslie's*, capitalizing on his experiences for personal gain.

Publishing Periodicals in New York

Thomas Nast left no records to indicate when he first noticed the thriving publishing world of antebellum New York. We do not

establishments lying between Spruce and John Streets." *Frank Leslie's Illustrated News*, January 5, 1856.

⁵⁷ Paine, *Thomas Nast*, p. 18. James Parton, *Caricature and Other Comic Art In All Times and Many Lands* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1877), pp. 318-334, especially pp. 326-327.

⁵⁸ On the depression of 1854 in New York, see Anbinder, *Five Points*, pp. 133-135; Paine, *Thomas Nast*, p. 28.

know whether his parents read newspapers, although there were several German-language papers they could have read.⁵⁹ We do not know whether Nast observed the comings and goings of the young men and skilled artisans whose work produced the printed pages so common by mid-century. At some point, however, Nast must have become aware of the opportunities inherent in the new illustrated newspapers, because he leapt at the chance to use his talent in their service.⁶⁰ The ink on the first edition of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated News* was hardly dry when Nast charmed his way into a job, which suggests that he – who so loved drawing the events taking place on the streets – immediately understood what illustrated journalism had to offer. And New York was a uniquely rich market for such a paper.

Whether regarding newspapers, magazines, books or prints, New York was the capital of American literary culture. Not only did one third of the periodicals delivered in America issue from New York State, the city of New York held a powerful sway over the

⁵⁹ Joseph Thomas Nast, as a musician with a large band, may have read sheet music, which would imply a level of education that might also include literacy. Mrs. Nast is a complete mystery in this regard. No letters exist from Thomas Nast to his father, mother, or sister, and there is no record of him reading letters from them, either. When he was in Germany in 1860, Nast visited family in Landau and kept a diary for his own use and Sallie's interest, but made no mention of any literary artifacts (letters, diaries, family bibles, or other written materials). If the Nast family moved west after the 1860's, and they were illiterate, their absence in Nast's life after 1861 makes more sense, but there is no conclusive information on this subject. According to Tolzmann, there were five thousand German-language periodicals published between 1732 and the late twentieth century, making German periodicals the largest non-English group in American history. In 1872, Tolzmann calculates that eighty percent of the periodicals in a language other than English were in German, nation-wide. Of these, many were in states where massive German immigration meant an enormous reading public, especially Ohio and Indiana. In 1890 there were 727 German-language publications in America, many in the mid-west. The largest and most famous New York newspaper for German speaking citizens was the *New Yorker Staatszeitung*. In addition to newspapers, printing houses arose to provide German-language books, including translations of English works. Thus, a German-speaking immigrant could remain entirely current on American politics and culture without reading English, so long as he or she was literate. Tolzmann, *The German-American Experience*, pp. 228-231 and p. 397.

⁶⁰ One possibility is that Nast saw illustrated journalism on the street. Distribution, by 1855, consisted of sending a large packet of newspapers to an owner of a newsstand. He would paste the cover onto a large poster, displaying its illustrations and text for any passerby to see. The rest of the papers would be folded and sold, either by newsboys or at the stand. Since newsstands were quite common on New York's corners, Nast might easily have seen the emerging art of illustrated journals like *Gleason's Pictorial*. See Gambee, *Frank Leslie and His Illustrated Newspaper*, p. 50.

imaginations of writers and illustrators. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated News*, *Harper's Weekly*, and other illustrated magazines were of national scope, both in terms of the issues they addressed and the circulation they enjoyed. Both emphasized the culture of New York both visually and in text, and served as a source of news, gossip, and pleasure for New York's literate population. Scenes of the city, jokes about the city, notations regarding city events, all held a special place in these magazines.⁶¹

The journalistic culture this engendered in New York can be sketched in broad outlines through the personalities and opportunities there. Publishers, artisans, and artists all thrived in the jostling, creative city. The Harper brothers, who would play such a central role in Thomas Nast's life, are an example of the young men exploiting immense opportunities of the era. Beginning with nothing, they built a publishing empire, expanding into illustrated magazines at almost the same moment that Nast began working for Frank Leslie.⁶²

There were four Harper brothers. In order of birth, they were James (1795-1869), John (1797-1875), Joseph Wesley (1801-1870 called Wesley), and Fletcher (1806-1877). James and John began working in the business in 1817, when they were twenty-two and twenty, respectively. Each had trained with other printers, learning to use the equipment and saving money towards their own shop. The first book published by J. & J. Harper, Printers, was an English translation of Seneca's *Morals*. As the two younger brothers joined their business, the Harper firm grew, becoming Harper and Brothers in 1833. By that year, the firm enjoyed substantial profits, owned several buildings on Cliff and Pearl streets (a few blocks from Thomas Nast's future home) and published books from American and European authors on a regular basis. The firm also collaborated with other firms, sometimes in joint imprint, other times simply on contracts. In later years, the Harper firm was equally famous for its periodicals, including *Harpers Weekly* and *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. Prosperity

⁶¹ On New York's ascendancy and the content of illustrated magazines, see Mott, *History of American Magazines*, pp. 103-107.

⁶² There are three excellent, if not recent, treatments of the history of the Harper companies: John Henry Harper. *The House of Harper* (Harper and Brothers, New York: 1912); Eugene Exman. *The House of Harper: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Publishing* (Harper and Row, New York: 1967) and Eugene Exman. *The Brothers Harper* (Harper and Row, New York: 1965). Also of interest is Jacob Abbott, *The Harper Establishment* (Harper and Brothers, New York: 1855).

was one result of a success which continues uninterrupted to the present day.⁶³

The Harper brothers are a useful example of the vitality of New York's printing entrepreneurs because they demonstrate the rapidity with which publishers could make fortunes, and because their business depended on flexibility and unpredictability. Born on a Long Island farm, these men built a publishing empire in less than forty years. Each participated in the central business, but each supervised branch operations in his particular sub-field. For example, Fletcher Harper, most central to the life of Thomas Nast, became a publisher of magazines, most notably *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* and the *Weekly*. Unique in the extent of their success, the Harpers nevertheless are representative of an entire class of men who built businesses on the increasing appetite of Americans for literature. In New York, Philadelphia, Washington, Boston, and, to a lesser extent, smaller cities, publishing was a growth industry, promising riches built on the education and interest of readers across the Republic.

In the Harpers, too, we see the central characteristic of urban publishing: its constant change. From the beginning, the Harpers' business grew by recruiting new writers, seeking out new manuscripts from overseas, and adopting new forms of literature and literary commerce, especially the illustrated magazine. Publishing was not a business in which one could sit still, waiting for work to arrive. The Harpers' dynamism was the root of their success. Occasionally, that dynamism could even shade into the mildly unethical, as when they published English books without the permission of the authors or any payment of royalties. Because there was no international copyright law, and because American audiences craved British literature, publishers in America sought the latest manuscripts and fought to the death to obtain them. Frequently, books published in London would be whisked onto a ship, carried across the ocean, and reset for publication in the States within a few weeks. The Harpers, like their competitors, paid a premium for these works, always hoping to scoop the competition. The publishing world was cut-throat, and one had to think on one's feet to survive.⁶⁴

Purloined British books demonstrate the dynamism of the American book market, but they also point to the more mundane

⁶³ Eugene Exman, *The Brothers Harper*, pp. 1-37 and passim.

⁶⁴ On English re-prints, see Exman, pp. 48-59, especially pp. 53-54.

aspect of publishing. Someone had to actually set the type of those manuscripts, often working all night to transcribe the text. Those men, artisans trained through the apprentice system just like the Harper brothers, also thrived in early-nineteenth-century New York. Because of the dependency of printing, especially of illustrations, on artisanal labor, printing companies were places where literary and working-class New York intersected. Young men educated at Harvard and descended from New York's earliest Dutch settlers might stop by the office to present a manuscript, only to find themselves standing next to a semi-literate German immigrant artist like Thomas Nast.

Art, as a feature of New York's periodical literature, was not new. Printed images, usually engraved on copper or inscribed into wooden printing blocks, appeared as early as the turn of the nineteenth century. In the 1840's, new methods of lithography, printing from stone, made it far faster, easier, and cheaper to produce prints on paper. This innovation, imported from Europe via New York, meant that current events or sentimental scenes could be represented through images within two to three weeks, and it was the foundation of the businesses of both newspaper publishers and printmakers like Currier and Ives.⁶⁵ It was Frank Leslie, however, who provided a method which allowed for faster printing of wood-block images in newspapers. Observing that the delay was largely caused by the time required to inscribe a drawing onto a wood block, Leslie hired multiple engravers, broke blocks into smaller squares, and farmed out the inscribing. Working on a smaller portion of a large drawing, craftsmen could finish much faster. They then fitted the pieces together, reassembling the picture, and printed from the whole.⁶⁶ Some Nast drawings,

⁶⁵ On lithography and its changing role in the United States, see Peter C. Marzio, *The Democratic Art* (Fort Worth, Texas: Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1980). On lithographic art and Currier and Ives, see Sally Pierce and Catharina Slauterback, *Boston Lithography, 1825-1880* (Boston: Boston Athenaeum, 1991), and Bryan F. LeBeau, *Currier and Ives: America Imagined* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001).

⁶⁶ Paine, *Thomas Nast*, pp. 19-20; Mott, *History of American Magazines*, p. 44; Gambee, *Frank Leslie and His Illustrated Newspaper*, p. 47. Gambee points out that Frank Leslie didn't introduce the multiple-block method to the United States, but that his work with it was the first successful use of it in the service of illustrated journalism. It is because of his success that Leslie is so closely associated with the process. It is also important to note, when calculating the time required to produce an illustration, the curious dating of Leslie's paper. Issues bore a date which reflected the week to come, rather than the week just past. So, for example, the January 12 issue, in which a New Year's Day murder was reported, arrived on

executed in this way, can be seen today at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The lines from the blocks are faintly visible on the prints.⁶⁷ Leslie's method sped print production enormously, and it enhanced the already competitive atmosphere among newspaper publishers. Every story was a race to print, with accompanying pictures, often embellished with lurid detail.⁶⁸ In the case of disastrous, tragic, or splendid events, the visual element could substantially enhance the power of a written account. Dynamic, business-savvy publishing men like the Harper brothers saw this and gambled on the success of an illustrated periodical.

Newspaper publishing centered on Franklin Square in the 1840s and 1850s. Many newspapers remained there after the Civil War. The Harper Brothers publishing house, including *Harper's Weekly*, operated out of Franklin Square into the twentieth century.⁶⁹ So when illustrated newspapers became a hot new trend in publishing, their production also centered on Franklin Square, within a mile of Nast's home. He admitted to Paine that he was once so captivated by a printed poster he tried to tear it down to keep.⁷⁰ Perhaps the images in newspapers, hawked in the street by children his own age and younger, were equally enthralling as he honed his artistic talent. As we saw above, there is good reason to think that Nast needed a source of income. How natural for his environment, talent, and need to coincide in illustrated newspapers.

Had those papers been concerned primarily with presenting an idealized vision of New York life, or had they relied on allegorical

newsstands on January 5th. Thus the illustrations in the January 12th issues reflected the news of the last week of December and first week of January, and took only about one week to create. See Gambee, p. 56.

⁶⁷ Three prints, 1653 (3, 4 and 5), at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, American Prints, 19th Century, MM85208 and SP3599.

⁶⁸ An excellent example of this is *Leslie's* edition of January 20, 1872. On the cover is a full-page depiction of the murder of Colonel Fisk, complete with the stunned onlooker, the billowing cape, and the cloud of smoke surrounding the firing gun. A subtitle identifies the location as the Grand Central Hotel, the "scene of the tragedy." See Mott, *History of American Magazines*, p. 454.

⁶⁹ The Harpers began their business on Front Street, near the docks, then moved to Pearl, to 82 Cliff Street, and finally to Franklin Square (in 1853). The Cliff Street building burned, forcing a move, at which time the Harpers joined other newspapers in Franklin Square. All of these addresses were within ten blocks of Thomas Nast's home on William Street. See Exman, *The Brothers Harper*, p. 5, p. 12, and pp. 353-362; and Exman, *The House of Harper*, pp. 37-47.

⁷⁰ This is the same reference as above in the discussion on Nast's possible Roman Catholicism. He tried to tear down the poster while playing hooky from church, in an impressive combination of wicked behavior. Paine, *Thomas Nast*, p. 12.

images. Nast would probably have been unable to create images to suit. However, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated News* and papers like it recognized crime, disaster, and informal city life as much more appealing subject matter for readers.⁷¹ These were subjects with which Nast was familiar. Moreover, he could simply walk out of his door and take a short walk to observe any sort of city life, from slums to mansions to docks and museums. It is hard to imagine a more serendipitous partnership than that between the young Nast and an illustrated magazine. Frank Leslie, persuaded by Nast's drawing of the ferry dock, agreed.

Conclusion

To begin with Nast's own version of his childhood is to embark on a narrative of triumph over obscurity, poverty, and confusion. Through his talent, so the story goes, a little boy with no physical strength and little schooling became one of America's greatest artists. This tale, while romantic and appealing, ignores the context in which Nast lived and the fluidity of the world into which he thrust himself. Nast consistently remembered the world as a rosier place than it actually was, and when memories might have been unpleasant, he edited them for consumption by the genteel audience of the turn of the century. Through his biographer, Albert Bigelow Paine, Nast transmitted a version of the past which emphasized precisely those themes which he believed most powerful in American life: talent, opportunity, and hard work.

A closer reading of the New York of his childhood reveals a tougher city, one in which young Nast might very well have been lost. That he was not is a testament not to the irrelevancy of New York to his life story, but to his ability to transform his experiences in the service of his professional and personal ambitions. He was not the only boy in his neighborhood to do so. In fact, his greatest nemesis, William M. Tweed, grew up only a few blocks away, and was an emerging power during Nast's childhood. Indeed, Tweed and Nast were linked not only by their later association but also through their shared neighborhood. Both attended a school on Chrystie Street. Tweed enrolled there briefly at 11 years of age, in 1834. He left within months, whether unable to learn or uninterested in school, when the vibrancy of the streets seemed so much more appealing. His parents enrolled him in a boarding school operated by a protestant clergyman, but this lasted only a

⁷¹ Paine, *Thomas Nast*, p. 21

year. Tweed left school for good at fourteen.⁷² Nast entered the school at Chrystie Street at some point after his family moved to William Street. He left to attend a German-speaking school, which also proved unsatisfactory. The second connection has already been mentioned in relation to Nast's interest in fires. By 1848, Tweed was married and working as a clerk at J. and G.C. Alexander Company. He helped to establish a fire company, the "Big Six," in the neighborhood. Nast, living nearby and increasingly interested in the sights of the city, often chased the fire trucks as they raced to local fires. Some of Nast's first experiences of visual reportage, which became the centerpiece of his early work for Frank Leslie and Fletcher Harper, were provided by William Tweed and his fire company in the early 1850s.

These two coincidences would not be of special interest to an examiner of Nast's life except for the way in which they highlight the construction of identity in Nast's autobiographical statements. Biographers of Tweed, building a narrative arc to his criminal activity, have no need to hide the fact that the neighborhood he and Nast shared was rife with gang activity, petty criminals and ward politics. Writers may even exaggerate these qualities to suggest a basis for Tweed's later behavior. Nast, on the other hand, became a middle-class family-man, a person whose home, wife, and work were eminently respectable. How could he have come from the same neighborhood as Tweed? Reading Nast's reminiscences and Paine's biography, one would see only differences between them, rather than the similar environments from which they emerged. In contrast to the portrayal of Tweed's childhood, Nast's emerges as an idyll during which his latent talent struggled against only the conventional strictures of school and family. This essay argues, however, that the world from which Nast came was one of great vibrancy, both in positive and negative terms. Positively, it

⁷² Alan Bales, *Tiger in the Streets* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1962), p. 33. Tweed has been the subject of a lively historiographical tradition. A sampling of the relevant literature includes: Roger A. Fisher, *Them Damned Pictures: Explorations in American Political Cartoon Art* (North Haven, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1996); Jerome Mushkat, *Tammany: The Evolution of a Political Machine, 1789-1865* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1971); Seymour J. Mandelbaum, *Boss Tweed's New York* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1965); Denis Tilden Lynch, "Boss" Tweed: *The Story of a Grim Generation* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1927); M.R. Werner, *Tammany Hall* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1928). The corruption of the Gilded Age, including Tweed and Tammany Hall, are discussed in Mark Wahlgren Summers *The Era of Good Stealings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

contained a variety of nationalities and personalities, many exciting and exotic for a small boy. It offered him a microcosm of American life within a few blocks. Young Nast could hardly have avoided the poverty, crime, and simple dirt for which New York was famous. New York's city life, then, was all around Nast in his formative years. It taught him how to draw by providing raw material on every corner. And Nast used that material not only to hone his talent, but to obtain his first real job. Thus, the street life he chose to ignore at the end of his life must be acknowledged as the basis for his earliest success.