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Robber Barons and Humbuggers: The Rise of Philanthropic Museums in Nineteenth-Century New York

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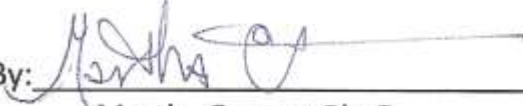
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Robber Barons and Humbuggers

The Rise of Philanthropic Museums in
Nineteenth-Century New York

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Chapter 1: Introduction

It is easy to make the mistake in believing that the museum field in America did not take hold until after the Civil War. After all, the most recognizable American institutions like the American Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan Museum of Art did not come into being until 1869 and 1870, respectively. The New-York Historical Society grew to prominence around this time as well, opening in its own building for the first time in 1857. Museum historians as recognizable as John Cotton Dana, founder of the Newark Museum, and Joseph Henry, the first Secretary of the Smithsonian, made the same mistake of dismissing previous iterations of museums in the United States.¹ However, post-Civil War museums, which are often considered the standard by which other American museums are measured, were not the first museums to make an impact in the fledgling country, although they were markedly different from the institutions that existed at the time—institutions which their founders wished to replace.

Unlike the museums that were then open to the public, these new museums would rely on philanthropy from the upper classes whose means were rapidly growing disproportionately to the rest of the population. This new class of American pseudo-royalty would take on the role that the nobility assumed in Europe of donating private collections that would become the basis of a temple-like museum. The collections contained therein were meant to inspire the visitor and promote the “refinement of public taste.”² The most “refined” nineteenth-century New Yorkers perceived the poorer classes as dirty, hungry, and morally corrupt immigrants in need of such an institution to complement the strong push for reform already in place. Contemporary accounts of New York’s poorest neighborhoods describe filthy, bustling, dangerous streets filled with uncivilized drunkards, prostitutes, and beggars who would sooner give their loyalty to a foreign

pope than gave it to their country.³ Protestant reformers saw in these neighborhoods an opportunity for cultivation. Museums by the rich for the poor were one solution.

Existing museums, it seemed, were not doing the job. Dime museums, the prevalent type of museum in existence in nineteenth-century New York, were for-profit institutions and thus, while ethical in name, were ultimately more concerned with making money than with the moral well-being of their visitors. P.T. Barnum's American Museum, and others based on the same model, competed to find exhibits and performances that would draw the biggest audience. Many times this meant pandering to the decency of the public by transforming the taboo theater into a literal stage for ethical soapboxing. At other times, however, the public was more interested in gawking at "freaks" or discerning the inconsistencies in a purported mermaid. Prominent New Yorkers openly discredited these institutions for their lack of intellect and reliance on the public's sense of morbid curiosity. In response, more high-minded museums based on the European model were proposed and opened whose collections could educate and transform the lower classes to model the Protestant upper class ideal.

While this seems a noble ambition, further examination reflects a less wholesome side of the movement. Large philanthropic museums were founded almost exclusively by men of the highest social order. During the second quarter of the nineteenth century, New Yorkers with means were moving further and further away from the downtown area as omnibuses allowed businessmen to commute from the "purer" neighborhoods uptown. To say that they were out of touch with the public is a gross understatement. In fact, they viewed themselves as so different from the poor living in neighborhoods like the Five Points, that "slumming" was a common phenomenon among the city's wealthy, and "Slumming Novels" became a popular form of literature to explore this exotic world.⁴ Just as patronizing justifications for colonization

inherently dehumanized the native population, the intention towards “cultural uplift and civic improvement”⁵ as directed by the upper class infers that the wealthy are capable of defining what is uplifting and what constitutes improvement.

Philanthropic museums, as evidenced by their prominence today, would win out at the expense of the popular dime museums. Although some form of the dime museum is still present today, the institutions that follow this model are seen as inherently less legitimate cultural institutions. This paper will explore the environment in which philanthropic museums would rise and subsequently cause the downfall of dime museums. First, an exploration of the social conditions in mid-nineteenth century New York City will demonstrate the growing divide between the rich and the poor and the subsequent disconnect between the two classes. Then a discussion of American museums predating the large philanthropic museums will illustrate a tradition of intellect and curiosity that would influence both the philanthropic museums and the gaudier dime museums. A detailed look at dime museums will make clear the objections raised by later museum founders. The general culture of reform and philanthropy will then be analyzed and finally the philanthropic museums will be placed into that context. All of these factors will show that the philanthropic museums did not develop in a vacuum but were the product of the American museum tradition in the context of the nineteenth-century reform and philanthropy movement.

Chapter 2: A Recipe for Reform

It is not at all surprising that reformist attitudes took such a strong hold in nineteenth-century New York. The city at the time was rampant with vice from gambling, to prostitution, to alcoholism. Especially downtown, mortality rates were much higher than the norm and disease was a constant presence.⁶ Before scientists fully understood germ theory, these attributes were inextricably linked in the middle and upper class psyche. Bad health was indicative of bad moral fiber and poverty was due to a lack of character. It was at this time, as well, that New York became home to waves of immigrants. The poorest segments of the population of Ireland, Germany, and later eastern and southern Europe made their homes in Old New York. Again, the miscorrelation was made by many established families that the “foreignness” of the immigrants led to their degradation, when in fact it was carried over from their poverty across the Atlantic. Middle and upper class, mostly Protestant, reformers were exposed to the plight of the poor and wanted to improve the situation. Despite what were likely the best of intentions, reformers showed themselves to be disconnected from the populations that they aimed to serve, a characteristic that will become clear again later in the discussion of philanthropic museums.

Wealth Disparity

The United States, as a fledging nation, certainly had distinctions between the most affluent and most destitute families. It was, however, too young to have the great disparity of Europe. As the country approached its centennial, however, differences between the rich and the poor became more pronounced. In 1800, the wealthiest 10% of the nation’s population owned

45% of the nation's wealth. By 1860, the year before the Civil War, the same percentile owned 60%.⁷ The rich were getting richer and nowhere was this more apparent than in New York, the nation's financial capital. In New York, the rich were pulling away from the poor even faster. By 1845, two thirds of the city's wealth was in the hands of a mere 3% of the population, with three fifths of the entire city's wealth belonging to just one percent.⁸

Much of this wealth disparity was due to the rise in big business and industry. The population growth of the city provided industrialists with the labor that they needed to make a fortune. Elizabeth Gray writes that, "the labor of these new arrivals facilitated the rise of tycoons, making American society more hierarchical,"⁹ but New Yorkers worried that industrialization, and the growth of the lower class, made the city immoral.¹⁰ It was no secret that the richest New Yorkers were becoming increasingly detached from the population. George Lippard titled his 1853 novel *New York: Its Upper Ten and Lower Million*.¹¹ Economic distance led to an emotional distance as well.

Us and Them

Class in nineteenth-century New York was more than just a definition of income or wealth. Ethnicity, lineage, and religion all played a role in defining oneself amongst peers and especially in differentiating oneself from "the masses." In discussing characters in the literature from Old New York, James Toweill argues that "middle and upper class subjects found it increasingly necessary to define themselves in relation to other classes and space."¹² They did this, in part, by moving uptown to separate themselves from the squalor of neighborhoods like the Tenderloin and the Five Points, an action which led to even less interaction between the

classes and a more discernible alienation of the most affluent. In fact, the middle and upper class saw themselves as so distinct from the rest of the population, that a popular pastime was to visit the slums, called “slumming,” and gaze upon the poor as if on safari. Sometimes slumming trips were more well-intentioned—with an altruistic purpose—but the same format of viewing up close, but still at a safe distance, kept the reformers just out of reach.

Many of the upper classes were descended from families that had built the young nation. For example, John Jay, who first proposed the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was the grandson of the first Supreme Court Justice of the United States. On the other hand, the poor were not only different as far as economic status was concerned; their culture was different as well. In the thirty years leading up to the Civil War as in the first thirty years of the century, most of the city’s growth was due to immigration. The difference was that after 1830, immigrants were not just coming from other states, but rather, were coming from other countries in search of jobs, which were now plentiful with the opening of the Erie canal in 1825. Rosenwaike explains the difference in the population: “the character of the immigrants to the city changes perceptibly, and consequently the ethnic stock of the community experienced a metamorphosis.”¹³ By midcentury, over half of the city’s population was foreign born and foreign born immigrants made up a disproportionate percentage of the city’s manual labor force.

The fact that poverty was becoming increasingly apparent and that most of the poor seemed to be foreigners, led many to believe that these two characteristics were linked. In addition, since most of the city’s vice and crime took place in the poorest neighborhoods, foreignness came to be associated with criminality.¹⁴ Catholicism, which was the foremost religion among the Irish, German, and later Italian immigrants, was viewed by many as an evil influence. One has only to read literature of the day where Catholic priests are presented as

corrupting influences¹⁵ and look at cartoons by Thomas Nast such as “The American River Ganges (see notes for image),”¹⁶ to recognize that anti-Catholicism was not uncommon in Old New York. What were viewed as such stark cultural differences led to the phenomena of talking about the lower classes in oriental terms. The Irish and German immigrants were portrayed as if they were as foreign to the Anglo-Protestants as the Hottentot tribes of Africa. Descriptions of lower class establishments were described as if they were taken out of Arabian Nights. Gray explains that “such references suggest how strange America’s urban denizens had become to these [middle and upper class] observers.”¹⁷ In the case of colonies around the world, the British Empire had come to measure the progress of foreigners by the extent to which they became more British¹⁸ because ethnocentrism led the colonizers to believe that their way of life was inherently preferable to that of the native population. In New York, this was translated into the extent to which the immigrant, Catholic poor emulated the native-born, Protestant middle class. Gray describes an example of this in her analysis of one contemporary author’s judgment of an Irishwomen’s cooking. She says that, “his judgment—and his decision to act as judge in the first place—suggest his feeling of superiority to those he observes.”¹⁹ Viewing themselves as so different from the poor and presumably immoral lower classes, those with means moved out of the slums. “As the slums expanded or multiplied,” Toweill writes, “so did the physical and/or epistemological distance between these and more respectable areas.”²⁰ In other words, as the population of New York City’s poor became more significant, the rich found it increasingly important to distance themselves from the masses. Literature was used for the “maintenance of class and ethnic boundaries and the power to define those boundaries,”²¹ but beginning in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, affluent New Yorkers could distance themselves physically as well.

Five Points and Fifth Avenue

When New York City, then New Amsterdam, was first settled by the Dutch in the seventeenth century, the city extended only about as far north as present day Wall Street—which may or may not have derived its name from the wall that stood near that location to protect the city from attacks by Native Americans.²² As the population grew and later skyrocketed in the nineteenth century, the lower tip of the island became increasingly crowded. Tenements that could house four families to a floor became the standard for living. Space was in such high demand that the recently filled in Collect Pond became a cheap place for landlords to construct housing and became the infamous neighborhood known as the Five Points.²³ Those who could afford to flee the disease ridden tenement neighborhoods did. Disease and cramped living spaces were not the only things that pushed out the more affluent of New York's citizens.

The city began to see differences from neighborhood to neighborhood—differences that are still evident today. The rise of industrialization in the nineteenth century began to divide the city into zones based on type of production. New Yorkers still refer to “the meatpacking district” based upon these industrial distinctions. Production labels were associated with class labels and by proxy with certain ethnic and socioeconomic groups.²⁴ In an effort to distance themselves from the lower classes, those who were more established moved uptown. An example of this is in the present-day Lower East Side neighborhood, previously known as Kleindeutschland (Little Germany): “as the first Germans came into Kleindeutschland, the Irish moved out and the Americans followed because *they were ashamed to live among immigrants.*”²⁵ Desire to distinguish oneself from the poor led to the establishment of uptown suburbs that were home to New York's most affluent families.

Some wealthy businessmen were so intent on separating themselves from the poor that they would walk 4 miles a day in order to travel between their home uptown and place of employment downtown.²⁶ Beginning in 1929, the introduction of omnibuses between elite uptown neighborhoods in places like Washington Square Park and downtown New York would make it easier for those with means to physically isolate themselves from the rest of the population. The omnibuses, which at twelve and a half cents per ride were significantly cheaper than the prevailing forms of crosstown transportation, were still out of reach for the average laborer who made only a dollar a day. As Burrows and Wallis put it, “this was class, not mass transportation.”²⁷ As the opportunity to interact less often with the lower classes downtown became more attainable, the ability to connect emotionally or intellectually with the poor declined. Immigrants living in the slums were perceived as so different that many affluent New Yorkers began to view them more as characters in a melodrama than as people. The two groups were so drastically different that touring New York’s slums became a pastime of the affluent for both self-serving and seemingly altruistic reasons.

Going Slumming

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, around the time that many philanthropic museums were establishing themselves in the city, a new fashion took hold among the wealthy: slumming. Slumming in the nineteenth century had one of two draws for upper class New Yorkers. On the one hand, the slums of New York were associated with vice. A gentlemen looking for a night of exotic mischief might be drawn to the Tenderloin neighborhood which “explicitly appealed to slummers, straying husbands, visiting firemen, businessmen on a tear.”²⁸

Here he assumed, and not without reason, that he could easily drink, gamble, and visit a brothel. In the slums dens of vice flourished under the corrupt watch of the New York City Police Department. In fact, the Tenderloin neighborhood's nickname has been attributed to corrupt Police Captain Alexander "Clubber" Williams who looked forward to the increased payouts he would be getting from saloons, gambling dens, and houses of ill repute upon his transfer to the precinct. He stated, "I've been living on chuck steak for a long time, and now I'm going to get a little of the tenderloin."²⁹

Another draw that the slums had was curiosity justified by moralizing rhetoric. Charles Heap, American Studies Professor at George Washington University, explained, "They masquerade as charity workers."³⁰ As evidence of the extreme disconnect between their expressed empathy and their unbridled curiosity, many slumming parties were so intent on seeing the slums that they would push their ways into tenements unannounced, with little regard for the privacy or humanity of the inhabitants inside. An 1884 article described slumming as "all the rage," exposing the cracks in the veneer of philanthropy and exposing the underlying motivation of entertainment at the expense of the residents.³¹ Slumming parties could view the slums, but generally under the supervision of a tour guide in order to ensure their safety. Again, this points to the perception of the slums, and its residents as immoral and dangerous as compared to the more pure uptown and upper class residents. The stereotype was not helped by the entrepreneurial tour guides who would often stage dramatic scenes that fit with the upper-class perception of the slums in order to make a profit. Slumming parties might be brought into an "authentic opium den," or witness a "kidnapping," all of which only perpetuated the negative impression of the slums' residents.³²

Rhetoric of Reform

Luc Sante argues that the reforming spirit did not grow in time with the vice of New York, but rather came late to the city, and even then, more as a way to establish the city as a center of power and influence than as a true bid for the souls of sinners.³³ The movement was marked by self-righteousness, whether purposeful or not, that placed middle-class ideals at the forefront of reform efforts. In fact, “during the nineteenth century, middle-class ideology of morality, respectability, and gentility coalesced into the dominant world view in American culture,” according to Diana Dizerega Wall.³⁴ Extreme economic and physical separation between the charity workers and the charity beneficiaries led to a reformed agenda that focused on Americanizing immigrants and making them more like the established Protestant elite rather than on providing them with resources for self-improvement. Perceived distinctions between the rich and the poor led to an emphasis on conversion over financial support. This is most evident in the prominent reform organizations such as the Ladies’ Home Missionary Society, which “saw the ills of the neighborhood [The Five Points] as owing mostly to Romish influence, and they wanted converts.”³⁵ Parishes sent missionaries to the poor of New York, the same way that they would send them to far off lands. David Ward writes that, “the environmental obstacles to mobility were judged to be less critical than the need for slum residents to assimilate to the host society.”³⁶ This sense of assimilating to American ways and tastes, and in a sense civilizing the poor, will become relevant again in the discussion of philanthropic museums. In general, nineteenth-century reformers were blinded by their differences and their distinctions from those that they were aiming to help. Sante offers a very critical opinion of well-intentioned reformers when he writes,

The famous saints [reformers] were heroes of an unreality set in books; they gave their life to a crusade of making life conform to fabulous dictates of a heaven of law. There were true idealists, naïfs in fact, while those they inspired in a succeeding generation were martinets and disciplinarians and specialists in punishment.³⁷

The nature of nineteenth-century reform sentiment was made possible by the strong dichotomy between the rich and the poor. An inability to empathize with the needs of the public would affect the success of nineteenth-century reform movements and in turn the ability of philanthropic museums to reach their intended audience.

Chapter 3: Christianity and Character

An inability to empathize with the lower classes gave the nineteenth-century reform movement in New York a very distinct character. Sante writes that

The saints (reformers) of New York were flawed, their major flaw being that, in their innocence from sin, they were also innocent of it; that is, while they might see sin behind every bush, they had little imagination for the forms it might take. Anything foreign might be wrong, any error might be deliberate, anything fleshy was undoubtedly bad, but at the same time they honestly couldn't tell you what went on in waterfront warehouses, they were persuaded that murder and robbery gave sensual satisfaction rather than they proceeded from fear and want, they thought that poverty itself was indicative of corruption on the part of its victims.³⁸

The movement, which was overwhelmingly made up of upper and middle class do-gooders, more or less ignored the material needs of the poorer classes. Instead, it focused on conversion and character building with the assumption that poverty and disease were somehow linked to immorality. Through the improvement of the mind and spirit, it was believed, the poor would be able to rise above the dirty, dangerous streets and achieve the middle-class ideal. This sentiment would inspire the founding of philanthropic museums whose collections would inspire the “masses” to dismiss the vice of the slums and partake instead in the moral entertainment of the galleries.

The 1870s was the height of the social reform movement in New York.³⁹ Sante cites the “sobriety in the wake of the Civil War,” as one reason why the status quo was suddenly less comfortable.⁴⁰ The emancipation of slaves raised questions about equality and the definition of quality of life. Great loss of life meant that many families, rich and poor, had a shared experience of grief and could relate to one another at least on some level. In New York in particular though, the Civil War had brought to light just bold the class lines were. The city

experienced at least three riots during the course of the war, the worst in 1863. In 1863, conscription was put into practice and men could be drafted to fight for the Union, that is, if they could not afford the \$300 to pay for a substitute. Members of New York's lower classes who saw the draft as a way to require the poor man to fight the rich man's war, attacked the draft office and took control of the city for four days. In addition to targeting African-Americans, who many blamed for the war, the mob targeted wealthy homes and the families that lived in them. Such a visible and violent show of class struggles was difficult to ignore.⁴¹

In addition to the class consciousness that grew from the Civil War, New York was also victim to the ebb and tide of the stock market. As the financial capital of the country even then, New York City was especially dependent on the health of the economy. Unregulated stock markets in the nineteenth century meant that the health of the economy was in the hands of the financially savvy and those that could afford to manipulate it. The "boom-and-crash economic cycle"⁴² led to a greater uncertainty in one's financial position. This uncertainty may have encouraged wealthy New Yorkers to think about their less fortunate neighbors or even to envision themselves in their positions.

Sante points out, however, that New York's richest families had become so wealthy that "they could forget they had been oystermongers and ragpickers less than a century before. As mentioned earlier, the wealthiest tier of New Yorkers owned the majority of the city's wealth. They had become so wealthy, that they could no longer remember what it meant to be poor. Because of this, they no longer understood what it would take to address the issue of poverty. This out of touch, but generally well meaning, perspective led to a warped agenda that prioritized moral reform, as defined by the reformers, over material sustenance.

Character Development

The reform movement was concerned primarily with character—more specifically, the molding of lower class character to better reflect that of the middle and upper classes. In *Bodies of Reform*, James Salazar explains that the nationalist period at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century was a time when a national character was built.⁴³ United States citizens defined what it meant to be American in a country that had relatively little social stratification as compared to its mother country in Europe. In the mid to late nineteenth century, however, an influx of immigrants who were seeking out a better life in America led to a rising lower class. This group had not experienced the development of a national character and had not yet learned what it meant to be American.

Salazar writes that “the development of individual character and national character were conceived as not simply reflective or ‘analogical’ measures of one another but rather as inextricably bound together in their very formation.”⁴⁴ Thus within a movement that viewed poverty as linked to moral character, citizenship and Americanization became important benchmarks by which an immigrant’s success could be measured, regardless of whether this assimilation actually led to social mobility.⁴⁵ In fact, the dispensing of morality, as defined by the reformers, was more important than the dispensing of material necessities. Charities and charitable societies rarely gave money to the poor, but rather described themselves as bestowing the “coin of character,” an example, which if followed would bring the poor out of poverty.⁴⁶ Experience did not contradict this belief in reform through character building. “The saints (reformers),” Sante writes, “were seldom poor, nor had they ever been so, and therefore they were prepared to be immaterial, to take literally the biblical conceit that the Word (the morality

influenced by the Bible) would be substance enough.”⁴⁷ This deeply held belief in social position as defined by social status, “legitimated and secured existing social hierarchies.”⁴⁸ In turn, the rich, secure in their financial and moral position, took on the role of teaching their version of morality to those who they viewed as deeply in need of it. In a sense, they took on the role of a parent raising a child in the ways of good character, giving them the authority to define what was right and wrong. In fact, much of the rhetoric regarding reform of the poor was similar to the contemporary manuals written for American youths outlining good character. Good character was seen as a way to protect against bad influences.⁴⁹ The idea of “protecting” the lower classes from themselves would shape the character of the reform movement.

It takes a reformer to raise a village

Assumptions about the correlation between morality and wealth meant that post war social reform was, by its very nature, paternalistic and often times self-congratulatory. Reformers were seen as crusaders against immorality and champions for middle-class values. As Ward writes, “Confident assumptions about the ‘reformability’ of the poor were initially based upon concepts of moral influence.”⁵⁰ His use of the word “reformability” is interesting here as it emphasizes again that poverty itself is reflective of poor character and furthermore that reformers have the ability to dictate when a person or population has been sufficiently cured of their immorality. A contemporary piece of slumming literature, perhaps better described as propaganda, states that “the duty of the present age is to discover the real facts of the actual condition of the wicked and wretched classes—so that philanthropy and justice may plant their blows aright.”⁵¹ Here again, the lower classes are described as distinct and of a lesser character

than their reformers and it is viewed as the responsibility of the well off to correct their character. As Toweill points out, the language used in this type of literature often gives the impression of a harsh disciplinarian rather than a gentle helping hand.

The reformers' view of the poor as inherently wicked was naturally complemented by seeing themselves as inherently good. This self-righteousness is evident in Reverend Lyman Abbot's introduction to *A Woman's Pictorial Record of Gospel, Temperance, Mission and Rescue Work* when he writes, "the secret of success in all personal or voluntary work for the improvement of the outcast class or of those who are in danger of falling into it, is contact with men and women of higher nature."⁵² In other words, Abbot argued, the poor could not raise themselves up out of poverty; they needed the guidance of the reformers. As Toweill explains, however, the improvement of conditions for the poor was not always the only priority for reformers. "This desire to look at, and thus distinguish oneself from slum inhabitants was often concomitant with the desire to reform slum-dwellers into real and proper bourgeois subjects," he writes.⁵³ So on the one hand, reformers saw their duty as rehabilitating the poor from their wicked ways in order to improve their social condition, but at the same time, the very nature of their charity put them in a higher social stratum than those they were helping. And because they equated social status with morality, this only reinforced their own belief in the infallibility of their character.

The Big Flat

As can be expected, this style of reform was not universally accepted among New York's poor and the services of the reformers were not always taken advantage of. One example of this was "The Big Flat." This charity-driven tenement building had philanthropy-subsidized housing that

offered a better quality of life than many of the surrounding apartments. As Salazar writes, “the appeal of the concept of character to many social reformers was that it recognized and even critiqued the role that environment or ‘influence’ played in the formation and degradation of character.”⁵⁴ The Big Flat would address the environment in order to mold the character of its residents. The founder of this initiative sought out residents, which he called “inmates,” that would abide by the rules of the building in exchange for low rent. Although it was located in a poor neighborhood with the need for affordable housing, it was never full. It was closed in 1872 and reopened as a for-profit building with higher rents, at which time almost every room was full.

The most logical conclusion is that potential “inmates” resented the implication that they were of “a semi-civilized class,” in the words of the founder, that needed to be cultivated. The apartment building was meant to be a refuge for women from the dangerous temptations of the world outside. Here, instead of the immorality of the streets, the women would be exposed to Christian ethics.⁵⁵ Keep in mind that much of the target demographic was already, in fact, Christian, but not the brand of Christianity preferred by the reformers. Assembly rooms provided for the use of moral or educational purposes, but it is unlikely that the residents were the ones who decided what fell under that category.⁵⁶ Residence in the building was also dependent on adherence to certain rules that the administrators deemed crucial to the development of good character. The women were expected to abide by a curfew much as children would be.⁵⁷ The Big Flat is just one example of the reform movement’s misappropriation of resources for moralizing purposes.

Philanthropy as Reform

One way for the wealthiest New Yorkers to take part in the movement for social reform was through philanthropy. It was philanthropy that would eventually allow for the construction of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Natural History, and the expansion of the New-York Historical Society. Andrew Carnegie, in his influential article, “The Gospel of Wealth,” written in 1889, argues that the rich have a responsibility to help the poor. The way that he suggests they help reflects the rhetoric of reform that helped to shape his own giving through the end of the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century.

The wealthy, Carnegie writes, are “called upon to administer, and strictly bound as a matter of duty to administer in the manner which, in his judgment, is best calculated to produce the most beneficial results for the community, the man of wealth thus becoming the mere agent and trustee for his poorer brethren, bringing to their service his superior wisdom, experience, and ability to administer, doing for them better than they would or could do for themselves.”⁵⁸ While this reflects Carnegie’s apparent motivation to do good, in the context of the larger reform movement, his language is more loaded. The paternalism inherent in philanthropy is clear in Carnegie’s assertion that his superior wisdom and that of his peers is all that can save the poor from their fate. In addition, he says that it is the duty of the wealthy to administer their surplus wealth in the way that *they* deem most fit, not in the way that was requested by those in need.

This conviction is reflected in Carnegie’s prohibition on giving money directly to the poor. He writes about the difficult task of “wise distribution” of his wealth. “Those who would administer wisely must, indeed, be wise, for one of the serious obstacles to the improvement of our race is indiscriminate charity. It were better for mankind that the millions of the rich were

thrown into the sea than so spent as to encourage the slothful, the drunken, the unworthy.”⁵⁹

This language hearkens back to the emphasis of the reform movement on moral uplift rather than meeting material needs. Once again, it is up to the upper class to decide who is worthy of charity and define for themselves how best to administer charity.

Often times this charity took the form of public monuments, parks, or libraries. It also took the form of museums. Were these public institutions, built like temples and filled with the material wealth of New York’s elite, really what the poor needed to improve their condition?

In Europe, museums were seen as a way to “improve and harmonize society as a whole,” according to Andrew McClellan.⁶⁰ A half century before the rise of philanthropic museums in New York, Europe was facing similar conditions. The cities of Europe were “facing mass immigration and unrest in newly industrialized cities.”⁶¹ In fact, in the wake of urban riots, much like those during the Civil War in New York, the leader of the London police recommended that the National Gallery be expanded and rebuilt in order respond to unrest.⁶²

American philanthropists would base their model on that of Europe. Without the monastic royalty of the mother continent, wealthy New Yorkers assumed the role of the aristocracy. Their collections, like the royal collections in Europe, would become the basis for large museums dedicated to the calming and civilizing contemplation of art and nature. The museum had become an important tool in social reform and a place to educate and Americanize the savage immigrant poor. Post-war philanthropic museums were not the first museums to take hold in the United States. In fact, they were only a recent development in a long history of the field in America. They were however, notably different from their contemporary institutions.

Chapter 4: A Brief History of Pre-1870 Museums in the U.S.

Museums in America predate the nation itself, and the earliest institutions were distinctly American. A number of institutions were operating on the East Coast, even in New York City itself. The idea of a museum in the city was not a novel one; it was the structure of the museum that was new. Pre-1870 museums do not fit a twenty-first century definition of a museum and had been dismissed by museum historians for much of the previous century. Recently, however, some historians have defended America's early museums as precursors to the imposing, temple-like structures that museum visitors would most likely define as the standard. Their work has demonstrated that rather than forging a completely new intellectual path, founders of the philanthropic museums were growing from and responding to America's already rich museum culture.

Early Museums

Much like the history of museums in Europe, the history of museums in America grew out of private collections. The collections of all manner of curiosities were shown in colonial cities, much like traveling exhibits as early as the eighteenth century.⁶³ Beginning in the same century, academic organizations began collecting interesting objects for use in lectures, research, and other scholarly pursuits. Objects in these collections were meant as resources for learning. For example, the American Philosophical Society, later the Society for Promoting and Propagating Usefull [sic] Knowledge, had a collection of objects for the use of its members.⁶⁴ Sometimes, small teaching collections would grow to become much more than just props. At Harvard, what started as a collection of philosophical instruments, a telescope for example, grew

to include natural history specimens and minerals.⁶⁵ Private individuals donated their own collections to help build the one at Harvard, much in the same way as museums today build their own collections.

Other American institutions held collections that would later be called museums and thus should be considered in the development of American museums. The first collection to call itself a museum in the United States was the Charleston Museum.⁶⁶ The collection was founded in 1773 but was a closed institution, only accessible to the elite members of the society that owned it. Joel Orosz writes that “the Charleston Museum established, and for a brief time fostered, an elitist model for American museums.”⁶⁷ Similarly, the Tammany Society in New York, today most associated with its nineteenth-century corruption, began as a political organization in 1789. It was but one of the Tammany Societies in the United States at the time. The year after the New York Tammany Society was founded, it established a collection. The collection would last for 78 years, until 1868, before being dissolved. In this time, it would change hands five times and go by different names, but ultimately it had many of the characteristics of later museums. The Tammany Society itself was founded to raise up those well-off New Yorkers who had not quite made it to the elite and give them a prominent standing in society. The collection, itself a status symbol, went hand in hand with this mission.⁶⁸ Both the Charleston Museum and the Tammany Society Collection would be forced by public opinion to open their doors, the Tammany Society in 1791⁶⁹, the Charleston Museum not until 1824.⁷⁰

Collections in academic institutions or societies differed from today’s museums in a very important way. They were only accessible to members, students, or faculty, depending on the type of institution. The large philanthropic museums were open to the public, but they were not the first. After its inception as a closed institution, after only a year, the Tammany Society

collection was later forced by public opinion to open its doors in 1791. In Europe, many of the most impressive museums were built from the private collections of royalty. The first private collection open to the public in the United States belonged to a Swiss-American collector named Pierre Eugene Du Simitière. In April of 1792, Du Simitière's collection was opened to the public in Philadelphia for restricted visiting hours under the supervision of the collector. His motives for opening the museum would be reflected in American museums for at least a hundred years and was representative of a core American value, one that was distinct from the charity of his overseas counterparts. He wanted to make a profit. Du Simitière was experiencing financial difficulty and rather than sell his collection, he sold the rights to see it. According to contemporary accounts, the collector had a well-organized and interesting collection.⁷¹ His decision to open his private collection would set a precedent and influence the way Americans defined museums for years to come. Du Simitière called his collection "The American Museum"—a name that would later be applied to a number of museums just within the city of New York.

Another museum to adopt this name in the period before 1870 was Peale's American Museum. Peale's museum is perhaps the strongest piece of evidence that the museum movement was alive and well in the days before the philanthropic museums. Charles Wilson Peale was an American painter who was also interested in the natural sciences. He opened his museum in Philadelphia, and his sons would later have similar museums in cities like Baltimore and New York. Peale built his museum from the remains of Du Simitière's collection and retained his for-profit situation as well.⁷² Because the museum needed to support Peale and his very large family, it had to appeal to be a popular institution. Peale was still concerned with the educational quality of his museum, however, so he consulted with prominent scientists in the planning of his

exhibit halls.⁷³ The Peale museum was a curiosity cabinet in the sense that it exhibited all manner of objects from taxidermied animals to portraits of historical figures. At the same time, though, Peale, more than any before him, was particularly concerned with the educational opportunities that his collection could provide to the public.

Dismissal of Early Museums

1870, a year that for all intents and purposes marked the beginning of the rise of philanthropic museums, does not indicate the beginning of the museum movement in the United States, though, it will be shown to indicate a turning point. Despite this long history of museums, many museum historians have dismissed pre-1870 museums. Joseph Henry, the first secretary of the Smithsonian, and George Brown Good, the Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian in charge of the National Museums, argued that pre-1870 museums were nothing more than curious objects or specimens on display with no educational value. Essentially, they considered these institutions as sideshows which should not be considered museums.⁷⁴

John Cotton Dana, the founder of the Newark Museum, and Theodore L. Low, author “The Museum as Social Instrument,” argued that museums had so closely imitated elitist European models, “that museums soon became little more than isolated segments of European culture set in a hostile environment.”⁷⁵ As has already been seen and will be made even clearer in the next section, the museums that existed in the United States before 1870 took very little influence in style and structure from their European counterparts. In fact, the Tammany Society Museum focused on collecting objects that were specifically patriotic in nature. The concept of a for-profit museum was also very American and represented American ingenuity and economic prowess. In the past quarter century historians have begun to question this dismissal and to

explore pre-1870 museums as a vital stepping off point for the later philanthropic museums that we think of today.

Defense of Early Museums

Museums like the Tammany Society Museum, Du Simitière's American Museum, and Peale's Museum were vital to the development of later behemoths like the American Museum of Natural and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Some historians have come to the defense of that viewpoint and painted these institutions in a more serious light. Joel Orosz titles his book about pre-1870 museums *Curators and Culture*, which implies that the men who founded these museums were not simply showmen but thoughtful curators. The subtitle, "The Museum Movement in America 1740-1870," identifies these institutions as part of the museum movement, not as a separate category of sideshow or circus. He traces the history of these museums as a progression towards the reform-minded philanthropic institutions of the present study.

In addition, *Mr. Peale's Museum: Charles Willson Peale and the First Popular Museum of Natural Science and Art* by Charles Coleman Sellers, describes the museums of Charles Wilson Peale, which did not meet the 1870 cut off but which clearly fall under the category of American museums.⁷⁶ Peale's museum in Baltimore remained open until 1997 and put on an exhibition in 1990 titled "Mermaids, Mummies, and Mastodons," which explored the early years of American museums, focusing on those owned by Peale.⁷⁷

Lisa Rochelle Murray from the University of Texas tackles perhaps the most controversial institution to be called a museum, Barnum's American Museum. Even taking into account his showmanship and use of known hoaxes, Murray argues that Barnum's museum was,

in fact, educational. She argues that the showman was interested in his audience having a learning experience, albeit an unconventional one, and supports this by placing his exhibitions and practices into modern museum education frameworks.⁷⁸

Museums did exist and were well-known institutions in the United States before the rise of philanthropic museums, though they were very different from the large temples of knowledge that we think of today. Instead, they were often small, for profit, and catered to the public's interests. Nowhere was this more true than in the museums that dominated in the mid to late nineteenth century, the museums that philanthropic museums hoped to replace: the dime museums.

Chapter 5: Dime Museums

It is hard to imagine the atmosphere inside of a dime museum from a twenty-first century perspective. Dime museums were a mix of a museum, a sideshow, a theater, and a world's fair. They grew out of the curiosity cabinets that would later become museums but degenerated into the commercial ventures that many museum professionals would dismiss as museums altogether. Their reputation was marred by the founders of the large philanthropic museums who saw them as nothing more than useless frivolity as compared to the useful entertainment that could be had at a place like the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Despite their popularity at the time, dime museums have been forgotten, or ignored, by museum historians. Their existence, and bombastic presence, would influence the creation of a very different type of the museum, a museum which eschewed what had proven to be a successful model in America in favor of one more high-minded and European.

According to Dennet, “during its heyday in the later half of the nineteenth century, [the dime museum] was as popular an institution as the movies are today.”⁷⁹ P.T. Barnum's American Museum was the most memorable and influential, but it certainly was not the only institution of its kind. At thirty-seven similar museums would make their home in New York City alone, not to mention those in Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, and other cities throughout the nation.⁸⁰ So many dime museums were in the market that at one point competition pushed the admission price down to 10¢, thus bestowing the moniker of “dime museum.”⁸¹ In fact most dime museums charged around 50¢ admission, in the same price range as much of their more “respectable” competition.

For Profit Institutions

Like the philanthropic museums that would replace them, dime museums were descended from curiosity cabinets—collections that were varied in content and may or may not have been organized or interpreted. Barnum's American Museum, for example, presented “wax figures, ‘human wonders,’ a menagerie, dioramas, edifying dramas, mechanical contrivances, panoramic views, and sundry frauds.”⁸² Curiosity cabinets were generally privately owned by a wealthy merchant, artisan, or even noble, but sometimes they were displayed in public places, in particular in eighteenth-century taverns from which dime museums would find their inspiration.⁸³ Taverns in the eighteenth century were not what we would think of as taverns today. While they still served alcohol, they were more than just a place of entertainment. Taverns were used for anything from voting to picking up mail. They were public institutions from the start where the common man was welcome.

Thus dime museum proprietors did not design their collections and exhibitions for the high minded, but for anybody with fifty cents. For this reason, proprietors were very conscious of what the public wanted to see and strived to give it to them. In a letter that Barnum wrote to his friend, who was also a dime museum owner, he asks for the “fat boy” because he knows the public wants to see him and Barnum wants to put the boy on display as soon as possible.⁸⁴ The problem inherent in this business model, however, was that a desire to please the public more than competitors led to inauthenticity.⁸⁵ “Human wonders,” such as Charles Stratton, were presented with titles such as “General Tom Thumb,” because proprietors thought that it gave them an air of class and respectability.⁸⁶ Stratton, who was presented as eleven years old when he began touring with P.T. Barnum, was actually only five.⁸⁷ The showman thought that the

audience would be less impressed if they knew the performer's real age and so he adjusted the facts accordingly.

Owners of dime museums took advantage of other types of entertainment as well. Universities or societies that held collections would often have large theater spaces in which to lecture while using pieces of their collection as teaching tools. Dime museums also had lecture rooms, though the entertainment that took place within them grew to be less educational.⁸⁸ At a time when the theater industry was looked down upon by respectable society, the theater in a dime museum had a slightly better reputation and thus catered to the public's desire for theatrical entertainment.

Theaters

In nineteenth-century New York, the theater was considered a low moral institution. Theaters were places where drunkenness and debauchery were the norm and where prostitutes might meet customers. Dime museum proprietors, however, continued to call their auditoriums "lecture halls" even while presenting more or less the same entertainment as customers would find in the seedier theater establishments.⁸⁹ Museum lecture halls, unlike theaters, generally forbade drinking and encouraged families to attend together. In these lecture halls, customers might see a drama, a comedy troupe, or even a magic lantern show. Often times, the lecture hall was used as a way to draw audiences back into the museum or to generate interest in a "human wonder."

Dramatic performances in the lecture hall could take a number of forms. Some were based on literature such as performances of *Oliver Twist*⁹⁰, *The Scarlett Letter*, or *Les*

Miserables.⁹¹ Popular contemporary plays might have made their way to the lecture hall. Other shows might be based on biblical stories such as *Joseph and his Brethren*, *Moses*, or *Israel in Egypt*.⁹² The most notable shows that were presented on dime museum stages however were moralizing dramas. One of Barnum's most popular plays was *The Drunkard*, which warned, very heavy-handedly, about the dangers of alcohol by presenting a family that was destroyed by a drunken father.⁹³ Unlike conventional theaters, some dime museum stages were imagined by their proprietor's as "reformatory" spaces. After every performance of *The Drunkard* Barnum encouraged the audience to sign a pledge never to drink again.⁹⁴

Lax copyright laws at the time allowed the proprietors to mold the dramas that they put on to their own purposes—purposes which best matched the desires of the audience. In fact, many dime museums kept in-house playwrights on their payroll for just such a purpose. A version of "Our American Cousins," a play later well-known for its association with the assassination of Lincoln, was shown at Barnum's museum in 1857 under the title "Our Irish Cousins."⁹⁵ Two notable versions of "Uncle Tom's Cabin," by George L. Aiken and George C. Howard, were adapted and performed on Barnum's lecture hall stage. The playwrights had so much creative license that by the time he was done with it, many considered Howard's version of the play to be "watered down" and even "pro-Southern."⁹⁶ Dramas in a lecture hall were generally only booked for week-long engagements before moving locations, often to another dime museum in town.⁹⁷ During their time at a museum, dramas might be performed as often as twelve times a day including weekends and holidays.⁹⁸

Visitors might also see a Magic Lantern Show at the lecture hall. These shows played into what dime museums had already so keenly established, an environment of visual spectacle. Magic Lantern Shows were being presented as early as 1776 in the United States, but really

gained popularity during the nineteenth century.⁹⁹ “A typical Magic Lantern program,” according to Dennett, “featured a lecturer, often called ‘Professor’ or ‘Doctor’ who would project images from painted glass slides onto a wall or screen and provide descriptions of the pictures.”¹⁰⁰ These types of shows, which often included pictures of faraway lands, would provide those who were too poor to travel to get a sense of the world outside of New York City. Many of the same types of stories that were presented on the lecture hall stage, were presented on the screen during a Magic Lantern Show. Moralizing dramas and interpretations of popular literature were both popular topics. The phantasmagoria, or ghost show, also became popular in the nineteenth century, especially when they included the appearance of a celebrity ghost from history or literature.¹⁰¹

Another popular attraction that might draw visitors to the lecture halls was the variety show. Variety acts often alternated time slots with dramas, or had a stage all their own in dime museums. As the name indicates, variety acts included a number of different types of performers. Each show consisted of about six to eight performances, sometimes including a “playlet,” or short skit.¹⁰² Individual acts within the performance were often billed for a period of time before rotating to another museum to perform in another show.¹⁰³ These acts included both human wonders, who might be on display in the museum itself, and more typical entertainment such as singing and dancing. A music act might include “the La Porte Sisters, Queens of Song,” a piano overture by Herr Wiggins, or songs by the Quaker City Quartet.¹⁰⁴ Often times, human wonders might also have musical or other talents which they would perform in variety acts. Comedy companies were also popular variety acts. “Mack and Bryant,” “the Reed Family,” and “Harry Thompson’s Comedy Company,” were only a few of the options dime museums might employ.¹⁰⁵ The lecture hall, although a great enticement for audiences, was not the only

amusement to which visitors were drawn. In fact, dime museums are most remembered for, and criticized for, their exhibitions.

A taste for the unusual

There is a reason why many museum historians have dismissed dime museums as a part of the American Museum tradition. While many dime museums held collections similar to those that one might find in Peale's museum such as portraits and exotic animals (both living and taxidermied) they set themselves apart with some unusual attractions. Included in dime museums were natural and living curiosities such as the Fiji Mermaid or the original Siamese Twins, as well as wax figurines that gave audiences an up close experience with historical figures and gruesome worlds. These types of exhibits especially were looked down upon by middle and upper-class reformers and served as a distinction between the dime museums that existed and the philanthropic ones that were being imagined.

One of the most popular types of exhibitions at the dime museum was what we might now call the humbug. These objects, or people, were seen as natural wonders which were meant to entice the viewer. P.T. Barnum got his start in show business and humbuggery when he heard about Joyce Heth. Heth claimed to be 161 years old and the former slave of the Washington family. According to the stories that she told crowds, she had nursed the nation's first president when he was a baby. Heth was a popular attraction that Barnum, as manager and essentially owner, would tour and display to fascinated visitors. After her death in 1836, an autopsy was performed which determined her to be no older than around eighty years old. Still, this debunking of the rumors surrounding Heth only increased interest in her story.¹⁰⁶ This experience would serve as a model for other "humbugs" that Barnum would exhibit. The next

big humbug to make its rounds of the dime museum circuit was the Fiji Mermaid. In reality, just a monkey and fish delicately sewn together, visitors were meant to believe that this ugly object was actually a mermaid. In order to drum up publicity for the Fiji Mermaid, Barnum planted a story that the object was a hoax. Not only did visitors who had not yet seen the mermaid come to see what all the fuss was about, but many of those who had been tricked the first time returned to see how they were fooled.¹⁰⁷

Another element related to the idea of the humbug were the “freaks” that were often a staple of dime museums. Included in this self-proclaimed category were five different types of performers: natural freaks, self-made freaks, novelty artists, non-western freaks, and fake (or gaffed) freaks. Natural freaks included some of the most famous dime museum performers: General Tom Thumb, Colonel Nutt, Admiral Dot, and Baron Littlefingers, were all midgets or dwarfs. Their counterparts, the Giants and Giantesses were represented by performers such as Lizzie Harris, “the Largest Mountain of Flesh Ever Seen,” and Mr. and Mrs. Bates, the “Extraordinary Specimens of Magnified Humanity.”¹⁰⁸ These two groups of performers would often appear together to draw even more attention to their respective sizes. Other natural freaks included Chang and Eng, the original Siamese Twins¹⁰⁹ and later Millie-Christine (or Christine-Millie) who referred to themselves as the “Two Headed Nightingale.”¹¹⁰ Self-made freaks were those who were not naturally born with a deformity as was the case with natural freaks, but rather those who altered their body to such an extreme that they were now identified as freaks. The most notable example of this type of performance was the tattooed man.¹¹¹ Novelty artists performed acts that presented them as freaks. These included fire-eaters, snake charmers, and mesmerists.¹¹² Non-western freaks were presented as uncivilized savages from foreign lands. Often, their behavior was completely fabricated based on the false beliefs about exotic cultures.

The “Wild Men of Borneo,” for example were actually born in England and New York and grew up in Ohio.¹¹³ Finally, some performers were not actually “freaks” at all, but faked deformities. One example of the “Armless Wonder” simply hid his arms under his costume during performances.¹¹⁴

Although from a twenty-first century perspective, the labeling of performers as “freaks” seems cruel and closed-minded, many of these performers, who would be unable to make a living otherwise, were able to lead relatively happy and stable lives. Charles Stratton came out of his early retirement to help Barnum when he ran into financial trouble, demonstrating that not only did his time with the showmen help him to live comfortably, but also that he did not hold the showman in contempt.

Similar to the way that visitors were fascinated by the humbugs, waxworks gave dime museum visitors a chance to “admire the perfection of the fake.”¹¹⁵ Wax works, similar to those one might see in Madame Tussauds’ today, ran the gamut from the awe-inspiring to the macabre. There were historical tableaux, such as the assassination of Julius Caesar,¹¹⁶ and moralizing stories such as “Three Scenes in a Drunkard’s Life,”¹¹⁷ and some tableaux were based on bible stories. Waxworks also gave museum proprietors the opportunity to play to its audience’s darker side while still claiming to educate and set a moral example. Often times current events were put into wax, but the true educational value of these scenes is compromised by the fact that one of the most popular tableaux was of a recently-convicted murderer in the act of killing his wife and children with an axe.¹¹⁸ Even more horrific were chambers of horror such as “The Infernal Regions,”¹¹⁹ which claimed to encourage visitors to lead moral lives by representing the horrors of hell, but which in reality resembled modern day haunted houses.

Dime museums sought to present themselves as positive influences for the public and were able to attain at least an air of respectability for themselves. Dime museums had to have at least some semblance of purpose in order to appeal to the middle class ideal of “rational amusements.”¹²⁰ Patriotic waxworks displays could be justified as a way of teaching immigrants about American History, for example.¹²¹ However, they were still at the mercy of the public’s purse strings and needed to appeal to a wider audience. In order to draw the crowds, the dime museums relied, not just on education, but also on entertainment, or in present day museum lingo “edutainment.”

Edutainment or vice?

Despite their bid for a spot in the intellectual world of the city, dime museum proprietors were never able to gain full acceptance from the upper and middle classes. Their attempt at presenting themselves as educational and moral institutions did not fool visitors who saw right through this façade to the more commercial enterprise underneath. William Dean Howells, a contemporary author, wrote that “I don’t contend that it is intellectual, but I say that it is often clever and charming at the ten-cent shows.”¹²² Unfortunately clever and charming were not good enough for the social reformers of the nineteenth century who took offense at the popular, but in their minds lowbrow, entertainment to be found in the downtown dime museums. The City University of New York’s “Lost Museum Archives” claims that “despite Barnum’s many bids for respectability, New York City’s elite citizens regarded the American Museum with great contempt.”¹²³

The Nation was a paper founded by reform-minded Protestants that reached a small population of influential elite. A letter to the editor of *The Nation* from July 27, 1865, shows just

how much contempt many reformers had for the American Museum, and presumably the other museums that it influenced. The language of the author serves to illustrate this sentiment in the language of the contemporary reform movement. The author, in responding to the recent destruction of Barnum's American Museum by fire, critiques the museum and urges for the building of a more refined institution in its place.

"The worst and most corrupt classes of our people," he writes, "must find a new place of resort." Taken in the context of the nineteenth-century reform movement, "the worst and most corrupt classes," can be taken to mean, the poor, as it has been shown, poverty was presumably linked with immorality. The museum, therefore, should be a place of moral uplift in order to purify the masses and prevent the degradation of the public. He further equates the museum with the poor by referring to it as disordered and second rate. Just as the slums are described in slumming literature, he calls the former museum "slovenly," and describes it as chaotic and of a low quality. He even specifically criticizes the patrons that the museum would cater to when he refers to them as a "disreputable crowd" that did not visit, but rather "thronged" the museum. Instead, he argues that one type of visitor is more valid than the other, namely one who was interested and semi-knowledgeable about the subject. The problem is that this characteristic is predicated on literacy at a time when many New Yorkers could not read or write, and many could not speak English.

He also comments on the choice of exhibition. Rather than morally uplifting the visitor, he argues, the museum "pandered to the most foolish curiosity and to the most morbid appetite." Not only does he attempt to make a judgment about what is and is not acceptable to interested in, but he seems to equate poor taste with a specific type of New Yorker. "It has been many years," he complains, "since a citizen could take his wife or daughter to see a play on that stage." His

use of the word “citizen” is especially concerning, but along with his reference to female relatives fits into the paternalistic paradigm of the reformers.

Instead of another dime museum, which he condemns as immoral, he proposes a new type of museum that will serve the purposes of the Protestant reformers. His suggestions fall so closely in line with the later reality that it is hard to imagine he was not in some way involved. He lays out exactly the types of collections that he deems acceptable to be presented in a public museum. Included are living and prepared animal specimens, mineralogy, historical and personal relics, and art both fine and industrial. He suggests Central Park, away from the contaminating crowds of downtown, as a location. This argument is reminiscent of that made for Central Park itself: experiencing nature is good for the moral fiber of a man or woman. Finally, he argues the museum should not be a business like the dime museums, but should be a philanthropic endeavor to avoid the corruption that comes with minding the bottom line. He writes,

No individual or stock company which may undertake to form and manage a museum as a way of making money will be of any great or permanent service to the community... Let the would-be stockholder invest his money in a proper enterprise, properly guarded, and take dividends for his reward. Of his abundance let him give to the foundation of a real museum for his own enlightenment, the good of his children, and the honor and benefit of the community.

This letter to the editor, written about forty years earlier, is reminiscent of the rhetoric used by Carnegie in the *Gospel of Wealth*. He urges the rich man to get richer and to give his money to the establishment of a museum that will primarily aid himself and his family, but in doing so will mold the community in the image that he defines.

Chapter 6: Rise of the Philanthropic Museum

1870, often cited as the dawn of the museum in America, was not a beginning but rather a turning point. It is at this period, according to Orosz, that an “American Compromise,” took place between the push for museums as places for professionals and museums as places of public education. In the case of the philanthropic museums, they were founded with a paternalistic viewpoint in line with the current reform rhetoric which sought to define, on their own terms, how the public should be educated. Although it can be argued that the prevailing museum type—the dime museum—did attempt to educate its visitors, although in an unconventional way, the education offered by these museums was not in line with the middle-class ideals of discipline and self-control. The loud, gaudy dime museums would be replaced by quiet galleries where visitors could be inspired by art or nature. Paleontologist Edward Drinker Cope, writing in 1876, observed that “as the middle ages were the period of cathedrals, so the present age is one of colossal museums.”¹²⁴

These temples of knowledge, much like the libraries and other public institutions that were founded with philanthropic dollars, represented what their donors thought the public needed. As has been made clear, their perceptions of how best to help the poor of New York were based more on Protestant self-righteousness than it was on actual experience. The philanthropic museums would stand an example of just how out of touch the upper class reformers were with the needs of society.

A European Model

American museums up until this point had been grounded in a very American ideal: profitability. Because of this, reformers argued, the American museums had degenerated into places of rowdy entertainment and could barely be thought of as museums at all. Conn writes that “museum builders after the Civil War found this presentation of the world unacceptable. The new museums of the post-war era distinguished themselves from their antebellum predecessors precisely because they strove for a rational, orderly, systematic ideal.”¹²⁵ New philanthropic museums, then, would be charitable public institutions and would be based on the European, not American model.

In Europe, great museums like the Louvre were built from the royal collections of nobles. These collections were later opened to the public and added to over the years to become museums. America has never had nobility of its own, but in Gilded Age America, the wealthy families of New York came close. Economic disparity, as outlined in Chapter 1, gave rise to more defined hierarchy of wealth and an upper class that was much more visibly separated from the lower and middle classes. Private families accumulated wealth on par with that of European nobility and by giving their collections to charitable museums, assumed the same royal role.

Gross, when discussing the founding of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, writes that “from its inception, oversized personalities have dominated the Metropolitan; many loom large in American History, too.”¹²⁶ The men who were behind the wheel of the philanthropic museums included John Jay, the grandson and namesake of the founding father, William Cullen Bryant, an orator, poet, journalist, and successful publisher,¹²⁷ J.P. Morgan, the financier and heir to the Morgan fortune,¹²⁸ and Theodore Roosevelt Sr., father of the future president.¹²⁹ It is

fitting that in a nation that so valued profit, the pseudo-royalty would be the successful businessmen.

A museum for whom?

The museums that were established were meant to improve society, not by solving problems of economic disparity, but by encouraging a refining of culture. Some historians, Conn points out, have “noted how institutions, including museums functioned—and continue to function—as places of ‘civilizing rituals.’”¹³⁰ Critics of character building literature in the nineteenth century argued for more emphasis on the pursuit of culture to build ones character, and as the contemporary mentality equated poverty with poor character, it holds that the pursuit of culture would serve to address economic hardship as well. The fallacy in this argument is clear today, and was not lost on contemporaries. When a similar phenomenon of museum building for the good of the poor was taking place in Europe, the satirical *Punch* magazine wrote that since the government “cannot afford to give hungry nakedness the substance which it covets, at least it shall have the shadow. The poor ask for bread, and the philanthropy of the state accords them—an exhibition.”¹³¹ In the case of the United States, it was not the government, but rather private philanthropists who were funding the movement, but the sentiment remains true. An Old Master painting cannot feed a family or put a roof over their heads.

Moreover, as was evidenced in the letter to the editor of *The Nation*, this gave the upper class the means to define what was morally, aesthetically, and culturally acceptable. In the case of dime museums, the interest of the public ultimately defined what was in a museum. If the audience wanted to see a specific performer or object, the museum proprietor would do his best to obtain it, for the sake of the profitability of the museum. In the case of the philanthropic

museum, decisions about what is collected and displays fell into the hands of the donors who chose to give certain works and the philanthropists whose wealth afforded them the “power of the purse strings.” Control by the elite was apparent from the beginning in philanthropic museums, but it was also a defining feature of the institutions which might best be defined as their predecessors.

Scientific societies in the nineteenth century valued the ability to “speak with authority on scientific matters,”¹³² but that authority was and could only be placed in the hand of a man with means. In order to be accepted into most scientific societies, a potential member needed to be part of one of two audiences. The first was the professionals. Professionals were highly educated in their chosen field of science. New York’s poor families could not afford higher education and many children were even taken out of primary school in order to contribute to the family income.¹³³ The second audience was made up of amateurs who were interested in the subject and so had studied it informally. This too was unobtainable for the poor. Few laborers had more than one day off a week, and many were illiterate. Because of the inherent exclusion in these restrictions, the societies became a place where “men of learning,” could interact with others “of their own class.”¹³⁴ This class was an elite one. Sloan points out that the botanical garden, which would later become the botany department at Columbia was made up of four hundred members of New York’s “top social strata.”¹³⁵

This exclusivity would carry over to the philanthropic museums and further highlight the disconnect with the poor. Gross describes the Metropolitan’s early policies as having a “public be damned” attitude, citing its refusal to open on Sundays, the only day when most of the city had off.¹³⁶ Furthermore, although philanthropy is proposed to be for the public good, the sentiment that museums “must not be encumbered by the idle, or disgraced by the

disreputable,”¹³⁷ was a common one. In the minds of nineteenth-century reformers, that description perfectly fit New York’s poor.

The Downside to Philanthropy

While at its best, philanthropy can serve the public good and offer services that the state cannot, at its worst philanthropy can become an outlet for the rich to advance their name. Philanthropic museums were a mix of both. Even to this day, “acceptance by the [Metropolitan] Museum—whether as an employee, a scholar, a donor, a trader, or seller of art, a member of one of its many groups and committees, or, best of all, a member of its ruling board of trustees—is a version of ennoblement, the ultimate affirmation of success.”¹³⁸ From the perspective of a philanthropist, museums are the perfect institutions in which to put surplus wealth. In the case of a library, one wealthy man can put his name on the building, or on a wing, but in a museum, every individual piece of irreplaceable art or history can bear the donor’s name. George Stocking makes this point when he remarks that “palatable and visible objects could be seen as a return on investment.”¹³⁹ The philanthropic museums, especially those containing art were, “built as treasure houses which would both display and legitimate the vast fortunes of their founders, museums may have been seen as perfect exemplars of Thorstein Veblen’s culture of conspicuous consumption.”¹⁴⁰ As Carnegie would argue in *The Gospel of Wealth*, accumulating wealth was justified as long as the surplus was put back into philanthropy. For all intents and purposes, art in a museum with the donors name next to serves the same purpose as that same piece of art on the walls of a donor’s home. The piece still represents the collector’s wealth for all that see it, but when it is on display in a museum, that wealth is even more visible.

In addition to displaying the objects that the upper class deemed important, museums were seen as places where the poor could be taught acceptable middle-class values and behavior.¹⁴¹ Entertainment-based education, like the kind found in the dime museums was looked upon negatively by the philanthropist-reformers. Even the scientific societies that would become the large museums were concerned about seeming too much like dime museums. They avoided the term “lyceum” as they thought that it reflected entertainment connotations,¹⁴² perhaps because Barnum called his lecture hall a lyceum. The colossal museums that would follow would eschew entertainment in favor of introspection. Each of the following institutions had a desire to establish itself as a mechanism of social reform, but in the hands of the upper class, each fell short of its potential.

The New-York Historical Society

The New-York Historical Society was established in 1804, but it did not get its own building until 1857. Funds were privately raised to build the fireproof structure at Second Avenue and Eleventh Street, but the institution would later move uptown to its current location at Central Park West, next to the American Museum of Natural History. Frederic De Peyster, who was president of the society from 1864-1866 and again from 1873-1882, expressed his desire for the society under his leadership to become a “center of intellectual light for the city and state.”¹⁴³ He saw the Society as “an opportunity to inaugurate a new power in the social progress of the nation.”¹⁴⁴ De Peyster’s words are in line with the reform-minded rhetoric that surrounded the founding of the philanthropic museum and as such, he hoped the Society would serve as an institution to educate the public and so serve to help raise the moral, and by proxy, economic fiber of the city. Like the reform movement as a whole, however, the New-York Historical

Society was envisioned and managed by those who had little meaningful interaction with the population that they aimed to serve, and developed a reputation for exclusivity and arrogance.

Like the other philanthropic museums, the New-York Historical Society grew under through donations by wealthy patrons. Unlike a dime museum—which would pick and choose the objects that it wanted and discard those that did not serve its purpose—the New-York Historical Society, and other museums like it, accepted entire collections. This had two significant consequences. First, the Society was dependent on wealthy donors who would either donate their personal collections or donate enough money to buy someone else's. Second, the society got into the habit of accepting objects that were outside of its area of expertise. The entire collection of the New York Gallery of the Fine Arts, including the collection of wealthy collector Lumen Reed, was incorporated into the society's collection.¹⁴⁵ The Audubon Collection, arguably the society's most famous, was also acquired in this way.¹⁴⁶ Another example of this was the Thomas J. Bryan Collection of European Art.¹⁴⁷ In fact, the society was so content in its relationship with the upper class that it refused government funding and vowed to depend solely on private support.¹⁴⁸ This, and the fact that it did not raise enough money to stay open to the public,¹⁴⁹ only deepened the rift between it and the majority of New Yorkers.

The Society's library also grew to include maps and manuscripts, but like the permanent collection there was no real accession policy and the society's collection was growing fast. Because the Society became a repository of old records, it was especially attractive to genealogists. At the time, amateur genealogists were mostly upper-class families that wanted to trace their bloodlines and distinguish themselves from the ethnic lower classes.¹⁵⁰ The push towards establishing one's family line was another example of the very wealthy trying to establish themselves as a part of the American aristocracy. Whereas Europeans might try to

trace their lineage to the king, American Knickerbocker families would try and trace their ancestry to the Mayflower. The Society again established itself as a place by the rich and for the rich.

Even many educated New Yorkers were unhappy with the exclusivity of the society. In a letter to the editor of *The New York Times* from 1858, the author protests the transfer of the collection of the Gallery of Fine Arts to the New-York Historical Society. He wrote, “the historical society is too exclusive in its operations to be a suitable custodian of fine pictures.”¹⁵¹ The author was of the same reform-minded perspective that De Peyster claimed the historical society ascribed to. The author argues, however, that the society, in its current state of selectivity, could not serve this aim. He argues that, “a picture gallery or museum made free to the public, with such restrictions as will maintain order, is certainly, one of the best preventatives of temptation and a tendency to dissipation which is thrown in the way of the working class of people.”¹⁵² Again, the paternalism of the reform movement is apparent in his argument, but at least he recognizes that for a society to help the poor, it has to actually be open to all.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

In 1870, the Metropolitan Museum of Art was established and, according to Guthrie,¹⁵³ was viewed as a competitor to the well-established New-York Historical Society. According to a twentieth-century history of the museum, however, “no rivalry with any other project is contemplated, no competition save with similar institutions in other countries and them only such modest competition as a museum in its infancy may aspire to hold with those which were founded centuries ago.”¹⁵⁴ The founder of the Metropolitan completely did not even recognize the dime museums, then a very popular public amusement, as a part of their competition. Rather,

they put the future museum on par with those in Europe which had been established with the collections of a nobleman.

Like most social reform efforts, the museum was hailed as an opportunity to lift the lower classes from their filth and immorality and provide them with a spiritually transformative experience. These experiences were not to be found in the slums where many of the poor lived because, “it is in these labyrinths of such mighty and crowded populations that crime finds its safest lurking places, it is there that vice spreads its most seductive and fatal snares and sin is pampered and festers and spreads its contagion in the greatest security,” according to William Cullen Bryant, a founder of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.¹⁵⁵ With this paradigm, Bryant urged his fellow gentlemen, “my friends it is important that we should encounter the temptations to vice in this great and too rapidly growing capital by attractive entertainments of an innocent and improving character.”¹⁵⁶

“It was time,” proponents of the museum told the Union League Club, “for the American people to lay the foundation of a National Institution and Gallery of Art and the American gentlemen...were the men to inaugurate the plan.”¹⁵⁷ Their audience in the Union League Club certainly fit the bill. Like much of the reform rhetoric of the time, the upper class charged themselves with the responsibility to fix society’s problems, to put their wisdom and means to good use in order to serve the public good and address their own concerns with the city. In order to do this, they argued that they should establish, “a permanent national gallery of art and museum of historical relics, in which works of high character in painting and sculpture and valuable historical memorials might be collected, properly displayed, and safely preserved for the benefit of the people at large.”¹⁵⁸

Like the New-York Historical Society, the idea that the museum was for the city as a whole was contradicted by ideas of elitism. Control of the Metropolitan Museum of Art was deliberately placed in the hands of the wealthy, and the goals that they worked towards served their own class. The officers chosen to run the museum were all prominent men because of the belief that this would get the museum started on the right path.¹⁵⁹ Under their leadership, the museum became as much a source of city pride as a vehicle for social reform. The argument was that New York was already great and America was prosperous, so that should be made clear to the world through the establishment of a museum on the scale of those in Europe. While it may have been true the nation was wealthy overall that does not mean that the prosperity was universal, especially in New York. Another argument for the founding of the museum went as follows:

in our country when the owner of a private gallery of art desires to leave his treasures where they can be seen by the public he looks in vain for any institution to which he can send them. A public spirited citizen desires to employ a favorite artist upon some great historical picture here are no walls on which it can hang in the public sight. A large collection of works of art made at great cost and with great pains gathered perhaps during a life time is for sale in Europe.¹⁶⁰

All of these concerns relate to the loss of cultural property to Europe and not to social reform.

The only population that would be able to relate to these concerns are those who could potentially donate their collections to a large museum—wealthy men and women who could afford to collect the pieces in the first place. At the same time, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's bylaws state that the “principle should be to keep in view the historical aim of the collection and to admit no works but those of an acknowledged and representative value.”¹⁶¹

The obvious question for this discussion, then, is who acknowledges a piece's value? In the dime museum format, the public did because the proprietor was responsible for making a profit

and the best way to ensure that was by giving the people what they wanted. In the case of the Metropolitan Museum of art, the curators decide what is worthy of a spot in the collections and what is not worth keeping.

The Metropolitan Museum was from its inception and remains to this day a source of status. One anecdote describes a Mr. Sweeney who is asked to sign a petition that will tax the public in order to raise money for a museum in Central Park. As the story goes, Mr. Sweeney skipped the heading and looked right at the names associated with the proposal. Only then did he see what the petition was for.¹⁶²

The American Museum of Natural History

The Museum of Natural History was established more or less concurrently with the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1869. Many of the same wealthy men supported the founding of the museum which would focus not on art, but on natural history, archeology, and anthropology.¹⁶³ Francis Law Olmstead, the architect responsible for the Museum of Natural History, had also designed the Metropolitan Museum of Art and was one of two architects responsible for the design of Central Park itself.¹⁶⁴ Theodore Roosevelt Sr., who was a founding member of the natural history museum, was eulogized at the same Union League Club where so much was done to ensure the establishment of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The eulogy was given by none other than John Jay, the same man who was instrumental in founding the art museum.¹⁶⁵

The museum, although built with the same social reform agenda as the other museums of its kind, also fell short of addressing the problems of the poor. To start, its original location was

at the armory in Central Park, too far uptown to be accessible to the common man at a time when affordable public transportation did not reach that far north. When the collection outgrew this location, it moved to its current site on Central Park, but it was still no more accessible to the populace.¹⁶⁶ Another issue was that while philanthropic museums did their best to distance themselves from the “freak shows” downtown, the American Museum of Natural History was presenting the same type of material in a different format. While the dime museums may have presented non-western freaks on their stages and in their galleries, the ethnography exhibitions of the American Museum of Natural History presented the culture of non-western societies in much the same way as the showmen downtown. Even today, the American Museum of Natural History exhibits dioramas of Native Americans frozen in time that are strikingly similar to the dioramas of North American mammals downstairs.

While the philanthropic museums that were established claimed to serve the lower classes and offered a solution to the social ills of the time, their founders were of a very different class. The reformers that sat on the boards of trustees of these large, European style institutions had little in common and so were unable to empathize with the masses whose economic hardships they aimed to alleviate. Their motives, though seemingly altruistic, were put into practice within the paradigm of character building and ultimately did more to reinforce the separation of the classes than it did to aid the poor.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Social conditions in nineteenth-century New York made it an obvious crucible for a social reform movement. Increasing economic distance between the city's upper crust and the majority of its citizens led to a geographical and emotional distance as well. Members primarily of the middle and upper classes attempted to address the city's problems through social reform. Reform rhetoric emphasized the establishment of good character as the most effective way to combat poverty. With this in mind, most of the charitable organizations focused not on material needs, but on spiritual and intellectual conversion. After the Civil War, museums would become as sites of inspiration for this type of conversion and reinforced middle and upper-class values and taste.

These philanthropic museums were not the first to appear in the United States. In fact, museums, or their forefathers, predated the nation itself. Traveling exhibits and private curiosity cabinets were popular forms of display and many scholarly societies and universities had teaching collections. The most popular form of museum in nineteenth-century New York was the dime museum. Dime museums were for profit, entertainment driven, unfocused, and geared towards anyone who could pay admission. They challenged the middle class ideal of organization and self-control. With this in mind, the founders of museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the American Museum of Natural History, and the members of the New-York Historical Society aimed to develop institutions that were the exact opposite.

These museums opened their collections for free and relied on the opinions of a select few to decide what deserved to be collected and displayed rather than on the demand of the audience. The collections were organized so as to educate rather than entertain, and were only

able to serve an elite population. Some of these institutions remained closed on Sundays, the only day when many blue collar workers had off, and the museums were so far uptown that they were hard to access without transportation reaching that far. The execution of the push for museums closely reflected the problems inherent in the reform movement as a whole.

Dime museums have more or less gone the way of history. The closest equivalent might be the boardwalk freak shows that still perform in places like Coney Island. Philanthropic museums seem to have won this battle, but how far have they come today? The Metropolitan Museum of Art is now open on Sundays and is in fact now open seven days a week. The Brooklyn Museum—a similar institution—offers programs, are specifically geared towards ethnic populations. In nineteenth-century New York, foreign influence was often equated with negative influence. Such is not the case with the successful First Saturdays program at the Brooklyn museum which focuses on cultures that are prominent in the museum's neighborhood. Some museums are also establishing advisory boards to reach underrepresented audiences in their collecting and exhibition planning.

These museums do still have a way to go in order to fully serve the city. Recently the Metropolitan Museum of Art was given permission by the City of New York to make their voluntary admission price mandatory. Large donations still make up most of the budget for large museums and give power and recognition to the wealthiest patrons whose names appear next to the masterpieces that they have gifted. This is even more obvious in the high donation expectations that are required of board members for the largest institutions. Often board members are expected to donate millions of dollars to the museum before being considered for the spot and gaining the social recognition that goes along with it.

There are, however, a number of museums in the city which have been established more recently which more accurately represent the lives of everyday New Yorkers. The Lower East Tenement Museum tells the story of the city's immigrants and of the Lower East Side neighborhood more generally. By interacting with the stories of the city's immigrants from the perspective of the families who lived at the historic house turned museum, visitors get a deeper sense of the many stories that make up the city's history. These stories serve to correct and flesh out the earlier presentations of immigrants and make the city's cultural life more diverse.

The African Burial Ground memorializes and humanizes the population of slaves that lived in the city. The most notable aspect of this museum is that the burial ground had been lost to history before its rediscovery in the 1990s. The stories that are told at this museum are specifically those that had been thrown by the wayside and not preserved by the large institutions that took precedence in the nineteenth century. It was only with the democratization of the museum field in New York that the Burial Ground was able to be established as a museum and memorial.

Most recently, the 9/11 Memorial Museum commemorates an event which affected all New Yorkers, regardless of wealth, nation of birth, or race. Rather than retroactively looking back at groups that have been left out of the historical retelling, the 9/11 museum focuses on an event in which all New Yorkers have a stake. The focus of the museum is one that can build connections between visitors of many different classes.

Museums in New York have long served as places of cultural exchange and reinforcement. As part of the larger psyche of social reform, postwar museums became a place where high culture could trickle down to the poor and a place where middle-class values and identity could be reinforced. Museums reflected the reform values of the time, and so, like their

other charitable counterparts, were less effective in reaching their target audience. Instead, the institutions grew to reflect the taste of their founders and donors and ultimately reinforced the cultural divide which they were intended to close.

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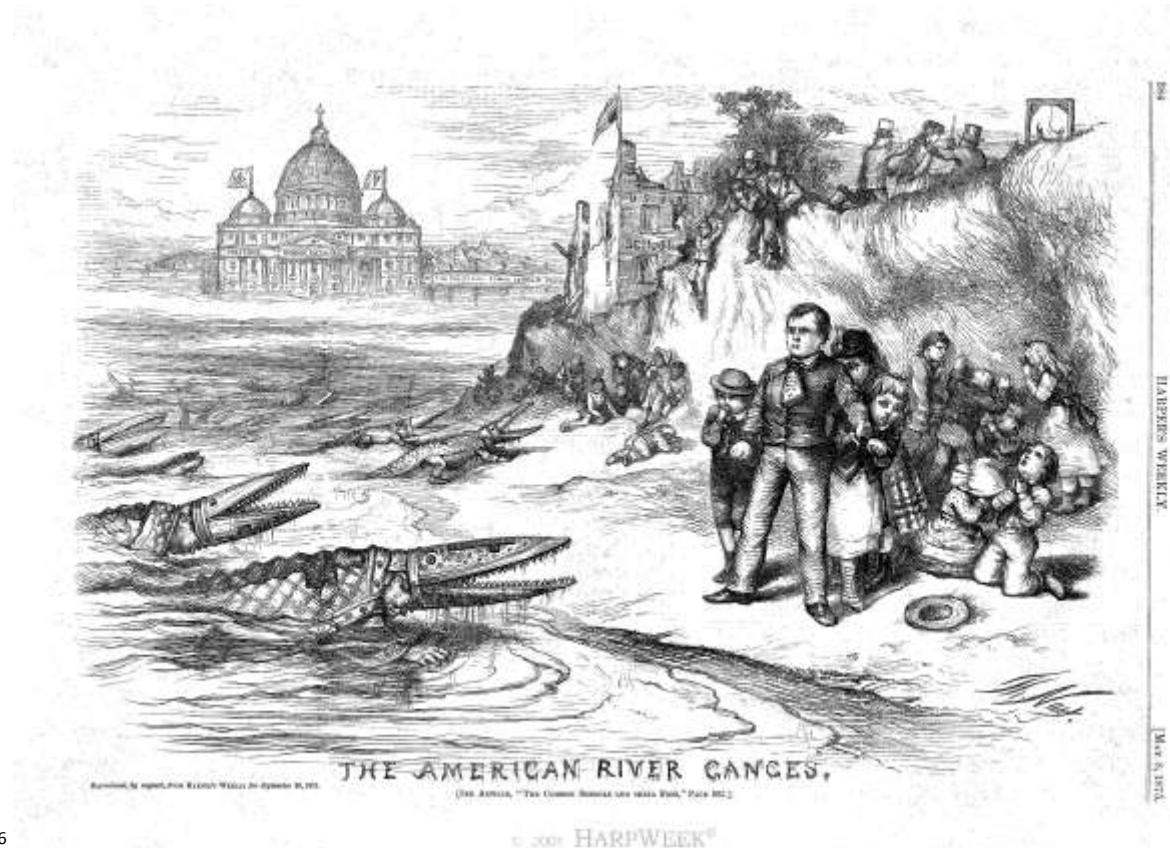
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16

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¹⁶⁶ Timeline.

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