

“Sporadic Outbreaks of Ruffianism”

The Battle Row Gang and the Police in the Gilded Age Press of New York

Victoria McCaslin

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Professor Shaya

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Gilded Age America was a land of contradictions. A country containing both immense wealth and immense poverty, nineteenth-century writers described it as “a place... of palaces and hovels.”<sup>1</sup> These disparate worlds were well represented in New York City, where the wealthy and the poor lived in close proximity. As the upper classes enjoyed their lives of luxury in America’s financial capital, the poor had a much more difficult time. New York City was home to many immigrants, who mostly settled in poor areas. These tenements served as breeding grounds for gangs. These gangs, prevalent in lower Manhattan neighborhoods, and their violent actions received a great deal of attention in New York City newspapers and magazines.<sup>2</sup> New York’s penny press began to take off in the 1830s and was still thriving during the Gilded Age and after.<sup>3</sup> These papers, more focused on sales than on printing important news, heavily featured stories of gang violence.<sup>4</sup> How did these sensationalist New York City newspapers portray these gangs and their violent actions?

In this paper, I approach this question by examining articles from two of the largest New York City sensationalist papers of the Gilded Age – the *New York Sun* and the *New York Evening World*. The articles from the *Sun* are from 1884 and 1885, and those from the *Evening World* are from 1904 and 1905. The two different time periods provide me with a framework, as well as enable me to see the changes in these portrayals that occurred over time. Through close reading of these articles and comparing the differences between those from the 1880s and the 1900s, I can see the ways that these newspapers portrayed gangs and how these portrayals shifted.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard White, *The Republic for Which It Stands* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 194.

<sup>2</sup> White, 194.

<sup>3</sup> Bill Kovarik, *Revolutions in Communication: Media History from Gutenberg to the Digital Age* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 70.

<sup>4</sup> Kovarik, 69.

By examining the portrayal of just one of the many gangs that plagued New York City during the Gilded Age, the Battle Row Gang, and juxtaposing its portrayal in newspaper articles from the mid-1880s to ones from the mid-1900s, we can see the blame shift from the gangsters themselves to the police officers who fail to stop them. Newspapers show the public's frustration with the gangster epidemic of the time, and, as this violence plagued the city for more and more years, the frustration with law enforcement officials. Penny press papers were not afraid to use their platform to speak out against officials and institutions that they believed were not doing enough to help the city.

The enormous levels of poverty, especially among new immigrants to the United States, as well as a government unaccustomed to such large amounts of people, contributed to the gang epidemic of the Gilded Age. During the Gilded Age, New York City, like other urban areas of the United States, struggled to handle the rapid growth of its population due to immigration, the likes of which America had never experienced before.<sup>5</sup> During the early to mid-1800s, America experienced a massive influx of immigrants from Europe, primarily coming from Ireland, Germany, Scotland, England, and Wales.<sup>6</sup> During the Gilded Age, which historians generally view as the time immediately after Reconstruction, or 1870, to the end of the nineteenth century, America struggled to handle this rise in population. "Between 1840 and 1859... the total number of immigrants soared to 4,242,000."<sup>7</sup> Most of these immigrants moved to cities, making America increasingly urban. "A little more than a quarter of the country's population counted as urban in 1870; nearly 40 percent did in 1900.... The Northeast, with two-thirds of its population in urban

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<sup>5</sup> Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 737.

<sup>6</sup> Burrows and Wallace, 737.

<sup>7</sup> Burrows and Wallace, 736.

areas, far exceeded [these figures].”<sup>8</sup> New York City specifically exemplified this new urban-immigrant population, since “together, New York City and Brooklyn possessed the nation’s greatest concentration of immigrants. In a nation that in 1870 remained overwhelmingly Protestant and 86 percent native-born, New York City by contrast was about 50 percent Catholic and 44 percent immigrant. The Irish-born made up 21 percent of the city and German-born 16 percent.”<sup>9</sup> Government officials, not used to or equipped to handle these large populations, struggled to implement government programs to benefit their new residents. As Burrows and Wallace write, “It was if a second city had sprung up, virtually overnight—not encamped across the river but superimposed atop the older metropolis.”<sup>10</sup>

New immigrants often lived in horrific, crowded, unclean living conditions: “These streets, rutted and garbage-strewn, teemed with vehicles, animals, and homeless children. The tenement population numbered half a million. Nearly twenty thousand people lived in dank, dark, miserable basements,” writes Historian Richard White.<sup>11</sup> It was these rough areas that served as the breeding ground for gangs, which thrived in Gilded Age New York and terrorized residents for decades.<sup>12</sup>

One of the most infamous hubs of gang violence in New York City was the area referred to as “Hell’s Kitchen.” This area of Midtown Manhattan was known nationwide as one of the most dangerous places in the country. Primarily made up of Irish, German, and Italian immigrants, Hell’s Kitchen’s “dominant physical features were the noisy Ninth Avenue elevated

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<sup>8</sup> White, 408.

<sup>9</sup> White, 195.

<sup>10</sup> Burrows and Wallace, 737.

<sup>11</sup> White, 194.

<sup>12</sup> See Herbert Asbury, *The Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2001; orig. 1927, for a comprehensive history of the prominent gangs of the time.

railway, which carried more passengers than any other line in the city, and the Hudson River Railroad, which carried freight and livestock along Eleventh Avenue, or Death Avenue as it was known to most West Siders because of the dust, congestion, and dangerous rail traffic.”<sup>13</sup> In *Paddy Whacked*, T. J. English calls Hell’s Kitchen, “the quintessential proving ground for young Irish ruffians.”<sup>14</sup> He also discusses the description of the neighborhood provided by social workers in 1910: “Hell’s Kitchen, they wrote, is characterized by ‘dull, square, monotonous ugliness, much dirt, and a great deal of despair.’ Their account included a description of what life was like for young kids, who spent most of their time on the bustling cobblestone streets hawking newspapers, fighting, picking pockets, swimming in the Hudson River, or flying pigeons from tenement rooftops.”<sup>15</sup> One area of Hell’s Kitchen, “Battle Row,” gave birth to the gang simply referred to in newspapers as the “Battle Row Gang.” The name “Battle Row” originally referred to the area of “Sixty-third street between First and Second avenues,” but it was later applied to “a block in West Thirty-ninth street, between Tenth and Eleventh avenues.”<sup>16</sup> This later Battle Row is the one that I examine in this paper.

The penny press, which chose the most sensationalist stories to attract readers, often published accounts of gangs, including the Battle Row Gang, and their violent crimes. Penny papers thrived off of sensationalist journalism, and so often published the most violent, entertaining stories they could find. It comes as no surprise, then, that these papers would choose to highlight the violence that occurred on New York City streets. Two such papers, the *New York Sun* and the *New York Evening Post*, demonstrate this fact.

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<sup>13</sup> T.J. English, *Paddy Whacked: The Untold Story of the Irish American Gangster* (New York: Regan Books, 2005), 115.

<sup>14</sup> English, 115.

<sup>15</sup> English, 115.

<sup>16</sup> Asbury, 216.

Joseph Pulitzer, publisher of the *New York World* and the *New York Evening World*, and Charles A. Dana, publisher of *The Sun*, had a well-established rivalry in the newspaper world. Pulitzer, in fact, only released the *Evening World* after Dana began publishing an evening version of *his* paper, the *Evening Sun*. The *World* and its evening counterpart were some of the most read papers in New York, heavily featuring yellow journalism and sensationalism. Pulitzer placed Charles E. Chapin in charge of the *Evening World* in 1898, and he headed the paper at the time that these two articles were published. “He had little tolerance for timid editors or writers, firing those who ran afoul of his iron rule, and the paper's staff loathed him.” His rule over the paper has a sordid ending, however: “In 1918, however, fate caught up with Chapin, when, facing financial insolvency and mental instability, he murdered his wife.”<sup>17</sup>

The *Sun*, originally published by Benjamin Day in 1833, was the first successful penny paper in New York City.<sup>18</sup> Initially criticized as “penny trash” by publishers of other papers, the *Sun* managed to survive, unlike the previous penny papers in New York. Charles Henry Dana purchased the *Sun* in 1868 and brought the paper into its prime. After Dana’s death in 1897, however, the *Sun* began to fall in popularity, and its final edition was published in 1920.<sup>19</sup>

The *Sun*, along with the *Evening World*, provide a fair example of the sensationalist press of the day. The articles published in the *Sun*, all from 1884-1885, often detail the crimes committed by the Battle Row Gang and then explain the punishment the gang members received. These articles serve as a threat and a warning. In “Attention to the Battle Row Gang” this is clearly seen. The article concludes with a conversation between a judge responsible for the

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<sup>17</sup> “About The Evening World. (New York, N.Y.) 1887-1931,” *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

<sup>18</sup> Kovarik, 70.

<sup>19</sup> Kovarik, 71-72.

incarceration of two members of the Battle Row Gang and the detective responsible for their arrest: “‘Tell Capt. Gunner,’ Justice Duffy concluded, ‘to arrest all the ruffians in battle row, and I’ll mete out justice to them.’ ‘All right,’ Detective Campbell said: we’ll fetch them in.’”<sup>20</sup>

Including this interaction, which may or may not be entirely factual, showed the dedication of the police force to arrest these gang members. Even the name of the article calls for members to read it and worry about their freedom if they continue with their criminal actions.

In “Achievements of the Battle Row Gang” a similar effect is seen. The article begins with an overview of the crimes committed: “The Battle Row Gang spent Sunday working the growlar in a vacant house at Seventieth street and Second avenue. They amused themselves by pelting passers by with dirt and stones, and toward night their drunken revel brought them in collision with the police.”<sup>21</sup> Despite the gangsters physically attacking the policemen that arrived to arrest them, the policemen were successful in bringing in one gang member, James Coyle, and arrested three more gangsters the following day.<sup>22</sup> A third article from the *Sun*, entitled “The Battle Row Gang Meets a Reverse,” details the arrest of five members of the Battle Row Gang, and ends with the sentences, “They all had glib answers to the charges and appeared perfect pictures of innocence wrongfully accused. They won’t work the growlar for six months to come.” Once again, this article served to show the power of the police force and justice system in putting these criminals behind bars.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> “Attention to the Battle Row Gang,” *The Sun* (New York, NY), September 21, 1884, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

<sup>21</sup> “Attention.”

<sup>22</sup> “Attention.”

<sup>23</sup> “The Battle Row Gang Meets a Reverse,” *The Sun* (New York, NY), June 9, 1885, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Similar themes appear in other articles on different gangs published in *The Sun* around the same time. For additional examples, see “The Socks Gang,” “Feats of the Whyo Gang,” and “A Brick-Throwing Gang,” all from the Sunday, September 7, 1884 edition of *The Sun*.

The articles from the *Evening World*, published in 1904 and 1905, shift the focus from gang members to the police force, expressing discontent with the law's inability to put an end to gang violence. In the article "'Gangs' and the Police," the author writes that, "When police discipline is strong in New York, the 'gang' fails. When the police lines are loosely held, the spirit of outlawry rises quickly to meet encouraging conditions." According to the paper, the current head of the police department, unlike the past two men who held the job, was not forceful and commanding enough to stop these gangs. "There is lacking at the top," the article reads, "the commanding power which should compel discipline and impart a spirit of helpful unity." The article then claims the only way these gangs can be stopped is if the mayor becomes involved, ending not with a warning for gangsters but with a plea to the mayor: "Can you win back for the police, Mr. Mayor, the respect of the 'gangs?'"<sup>24</sup>

The second article also expresses discontent with law enforcement. In the article "'Sporadic' Gang Violence," the author mockingly discusses the recent claim that a recent violent crime committed by gangsters was "only a sporadic outbreak of ruffianism." The article then details the multiple recent gang-related crimes, sardonically poking holes in the claim that these events were "sporadic." The belief propagated by police was that these gangs would eventually wipe each other out, due to "the gang code" that said that "the murder of McManus will be avenged by a gang member, that murder by another...." The author, not a fan of this theory, ends the article with, "But pending the result of these processes of self-extermination a little more police activity, please, to make the outbreaks less 'sporadic.'"<sup>25</sup> This article, like the

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<sup>24</sup> "'Gangs' and the Police," *The Evening World* (New York, NY), September 15, 1904, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

<sup>25</sup> "'Sporadic' Gang Violence," *The Evening World* (New York, NY), May 29, 1905, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.



other, shows a desire for more police activity and the belief that law enforcement officials were not doing enough to end gang activities.<sup>2627</sup>

By examining these two New York papers that consistently featured yellow journalism, we can see a shift where newspapers and journalist become more comfortable criticizing the government and those in power. While in the mid-1880s the papers supported and praised these officials for their efforts to end gang violence, twenty years later the view is not so positive. After twenty years with little change, some newspaper writers had grown tired of the violence that plagued their streets and assumed their readers had as well. Journalists used their platform to call for increased police action to take down these gangs, showing that papers were not afraid to criticize law enforcement that they believed were not doing their jobs adequately.

In an age characterized by the press criticizing government officials and organizations, the penny press of Gilded Age New York is an important precedent to our current journalistic climate. While the penny press is often stereotyped as strictly yellow journalism, the articles from the *Evening World* show additional value. Without our history of the press speaking up about institutions, we may not have a press today that is so willing to express discontent toward our leaders who are not doing enough for the benefit of the public.

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<sup>26</sup> Not all accounts criticized law enforcement. For example, the article “Police to Break Up Bedford Gang” shows a positive view of and trust in the police to put an end to gang violence.

<sup>27</sup> For an additional example of this criticism of law enforcement, see “‘Worse Dives Than Paul Kelley’s,’ Says M’Adoo” from the November 28, 1905 edition of the *Evening World*. This article discusses a prominent gang leader and says that police are unable to arrest him, and thus must “be content, sucking their thumbs,” until he surrenders.

## Bibliography

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“Achievements of the Battle Row Gang.” *The Sun* (New York, NY). June 23, 1885. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

This article, published in the *New York Sun* in 1885, begins with an overview of the crimes committed by the Battle Row Gang. The article then goes on to describe how, even though the gangsters physically attacked the police who arrived to arrest them, the police still arrested the gangster. The article shows the confidence citizens had in the police to arrest these gang members; it also serves as a warning to law-breakers.

“A Brick-Throwing Gang.” *The Sun* (New York, NY). September 7, 1884. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

This is another example of how the press portrayed gangs during the mid-1880s.

“Attention to the Battle Row Gang.” *The Sun* (New York, NY). September 21, 1884. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

This article tells of the arrest of some Battle Row Gang members. It clearly serves as a warning to gangsters, with the article quoting a judge who tells the police captain to “arrest all the ruffians in battle row,” and that he will “mete out justice to them.”

“The Battle Row Gang Meets a Reverse.” *The Sun* (New York, NY). June 9, 1885. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

This article, also from the *New York Sun*, deals with the arrests of five members of the Battle Row Gang. Once again, this article shows the power of the police and justice system in putting gang members behind bars.

“Feats of the Whyo Gang.” *The Sun* (New York, NY). September 7, 1884. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

This is another example of how the press portrayed gangs during the mid-1880s.

“‘Gangs’ and the Police.” *The Evening World* (New York, NY). September 15, 1904. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

This article from the *Evening World* criticizes the police and blames them for the rampant gang violence in New York. The author claims that if the police had a firmer presence the gangs would not be as large of an issue. The article ends with a plea to the mayor to fix this, since the police no longer have the respect of the gangs.

“Police to Break Up Bedford Gang.” *The Evening World* (New York, NY). December 17, 1903. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

This is another example of how the press portrayed gangs during the mid-1900s.

“The Socks Gang.” *The Sun* (New York, NY). September 7, 1884. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

This is another example of how the press portrayed gangs during the mid-1880s.

“‘Sporadic’ Gang Violence.” *The Evening World* (New York, NY). May 29, 1905. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

This article from the *Evening World* takes a mocking approach to the discussion of the police’s ability to handle gang violence.

“‘Worse Dives Than Paul Kelley’s,’ Says M’Adoo.” *The Evening World* (New York, NY). November 28, 1905. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.

This is another example of how the press portrayed gangs during the mid-1900s.

## *Secondary Sources*

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This book, originally published in 1927, details the history of the gangs that terrorized New York City. It includes the beginnings of the gangs and tracks them to their demise.

Burrows, Edwin G. and Mike Wallace. *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

This book, written by historians Burrows and Wallace, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, and provides an in-depth overview of the history of New York City.

English, T. J. *Paddy Whacked: The Untold Story of the Irish-American Gangster*. New York: HarperCollins, 2014.

This book tells the history of Irish-American gangs. Irish-Americans made up a prominent number of gang members in New York City. This book provides information on the Irish-American gang experience.

Kovarik, Bill. *Revolutions in Communication: Media History from Gutenberg to the Digital Age*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

Kovarik worked as a journalist before writing this survey of media history. He provides information on the penny press, as well as information on specific papers.

White, Richard. *The Republic for Which It Stands*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

White, Margaret Byrne Professor of American History at Stanford University, is among the foremost historians of the nineteenth century. This work provides a comprehensive overview of Gilded Age America and critical context for an understanding of New York City gangs.