Charles Dickens visited New York twice, once from January to June in 1842 and a second time from December 1867 to April 1868; he recorded the first journey in his American Notes, published October 1842. He was in ill health throughout much of his second visit and died, after suffering a stroke, in June 1870.

Dickens was enthusiastically received by the literati of New York in 1842, especially Washington Irving and William Cullen Bryant, and on February 14 the "Boz Ball" (named for Dickens's moniker) was attended by more than three thousand people. Philip Hone called it "the greatest affair of modern times."

Although Dickens echoed New Yorkers' enthusiasm in his description of Broadway (minus his warning about the pigs—"city scavengers"—he encountered crossing the street), he also found the Five Points section worse than the slums of Liverpool and comprised of "all that is loathsome, drooping, and decayed." He concluded that New York was a place where "a vast amount of good and evil is intermixed and jumbled up together."

Despite his criticism, New Yorkers welcomed Dickens back for scores of readings in 1867 and 1868 in Steinway Hall on Broadway and in Henry Ward Beecher's Plymouth Congregational Church in Brooklyn. Dickens delighted in the farewell banquet held in his honor at Delmonico's on April 18, 1868, and proclaimed, "I have now read in New York City to 40,000 people, and am quite as well known in the streets as I am in London."

New York

The beautiful metropolis of America is by no means so clean a city as Boston, but many of its streets have the same characteristics; except that the houses are not quite so fresh-coloured, the sign-boards are not quite so gaudy, the gilded letters not quite so golden, the bricks not quite so red, stone not quite so white, the blinds and area railings not quite so green, the knobs and plates upon the street doors not quite so bright and twinkling. There are many by-streets, almost as neutral in clean colours, and positive in dirty ones, as by-streets in London; and there is one quarter, commonly called the Five Points, which, in respect of filth and wretchedness, may be safely backed against Seven Dials, or any other part of famed St. Giles's.

The great promenade and thoroughfare, as most people know, is Broad-way; a wide and bustling street, which, from the Battery Gardens to its opposite termination in a country road, may be four miles long. Shall we sit down in an upper floor of the Carlton House Hotel (situated in the best part of this main artery of New York), and when we are tired of looking down upon the life below, sally forth arm-in-arm, and mingle with the stream?...

This narrow thoroughfare, baking and blistering in the sun, is Wall Street: the Stock Exchange and Lombard Street of New York. Many a rapid fortune has been made in this street, and many a no less rapid ruin. Some of
these very merchants whom you see hanging about here now, have locked up money in their strong-boxes, like the
man in the Arabian Nights, and opening them again, have found but withered leaves. Below, here by the waterside,
where the bowsprits of ships stretch across the footway, and almost thrust themselves into the windows, lie the
noble American vessels which having made their Packet Service the finest in the world. They have brought hither
the foreigners who abound in all the streets: not, perhaps, that there are more here, than in other commercial cities;
but elsewhere, they have particular haunts, and you must find them out; here, they pervade the town.

We must cross Broadway again; gaining some refreshment from the heat, in the sight of the great blocks of clean
ice which are being carried into shops and bar-rooms; and the pine-apples and water-melons profusely displayed for
sale. Fine streets of spacious houses here, you see! —Wall Street has furnished and dismantled many of them very
often—and here a deep green leafy square. Be sure that is a hospitable house with inmates to be affectionately
remembered always, where they have the open door and pretty show of plants within, and where the child with
laughing eyes is peeping out of window at the little dog below. You wonder what may be the use of this tall
flagstaff in the by-street, with something like Liberty's head-dress on its top: so do I. But there is a passion for tall
flagstaffs hereabout, and you may see its twin brother in five minutes, if you have a mind.

Again across Broadway, and so—passing from the many-coloured crowd and glittering shops—into another long
main street, the Bowery. A railroad yonder, see, where two stout horses trot along, drawing a score or two of people
and a great wooden ark, with ease. The stores are poorer here; the passengers less gay. Clothes ready-made, and
meat ready-cooked, are to be bought in these parts; and the lively whirl of carriages is exchanged for the deep
rumble of carts and waggons. These signs which are so plentiful, in shape like river buoys, or small balloons,
hoisted by cords to poles, and dangling there, announce, as you may see by looking up, "oysters in every style."
They tempt the hungry most at night, for then dull candles glimmering inside, illuminate these dainty words, and
make the mouths of Idlers water, as they read and linger.

What is this dismal-fronted pile of bastard Egyptian, like an enchainter's palace in a melodrama!—a famous
prison, called The Tombs. Shall we go in?

So. A long, narrow, lofty building, stove-heated as usual, with four galleries, one above the other, going round it,
and communicating by stairs. Between the two sides of each gallery, and in its centre, a bridge, for the greater
convenience of crossing. On each of these bridges sits a man: dozing or reading, or talking to an idle companion.
On each tier, are two opposite rows of small iron doors. They look like furnace-doors, but are cold and black, as
though the fires within had all gone out. Some two or three are open, and women, with drooping heads bent down,
are talking to the inmates. The whole is lighted by a skylight, but it is fast closed; and from the roof there dangle,
limp and drooping, two useless windsails.

A man with keys appears, to show us round. A good-looking fellow, and, in his way, civil and obliging....

The prison-yard in which he pauses now, has been the scene of terrible performances. Into this narrow, grave-
like place, men are brought out to die. The wretched creature stands beneath the gibbet on the ground; the rope about his neck; and when the sign is given, a weight at its other end comes running down, and swings him up into the air—a corpse.

The law requires that there be present at this dismal spectacle, the judge, the jury, and citizens to the amount of twenty-five. From the community it is hidden. To the dissolute and bad, the thing remains a frightful mystery. Between the criminal and them, the prison-wall is interposed as a thick-gloomy veil. It is the curtain to his bed of death, his winding-sheet, and grave. From him it shuts out life, and all the motives to unrepenting hardihood in that last hour, which its mere sight and presence is often all—sufficient to sustain. There are no bold eyes to make him bold; no ruffians to uphold a ruffian's name before. All beyond the pitiless stone wall, is unknown space.

Let us go forth again into the cheerful streets.

Once more in Broadway! Here are the same ladies in bright colours, walking to and fro, in pairs and singly; yonder the very same light blue parasol which passed and repassed the hotel-window twenty times while we were sitting there. We are going to cross here. Take care of the pigs. Two portly sows are trotting up behind this carriage, and a select party of half-a-dozen gentlemen hogs have just now turned the corner.

Here is a solitary swine lounging homeward by himself. He has only one ear; having parted with the other to vagrant-dogs in the course of his city rambles. But he gets on very well without it; and leads a roving, gentlemanly, vagabond kind of life, somewhat answering to that of our club-men at home. He leaves his lodgings every morning at a certain hour, throws himself upon the town, gets through his day in some manner quite satisfactory to himself, and regularly appears at the door of his own house again at night, like the mysterious master of Gil Blas. He is a free-and-easy, careless, indifferent kind of pig, having a very large acquaintance among other pigs of the same character, whom he rather knows by sight than conversation, as he seldom troubles himself to stop and exchange civilities, but goes grunting down the kennel, turning up the news and small-talk of the city in the shape of cabbage-stalks and offal, and bearing no tails but his own: which is a very short one, for his old enemies, the dogs, have been at that too, and have left him hardly enough to swear by. He is in every respect a republican pig, going wherever he pleases, and mingling with the best society, on an equal, if not superior footing, for every one makes way when he appears, and the haughtiest give him the wall, if he prefer it. He is a great philosopher, and seldom moved, unless by the dogs before mentioned. Sometimes, indeed, you may see his small eye twinkling on a slaughtered friend, whose carcase garnishes a butcher's door-post, but he grunts out "Such is life: all flesh is pork!" buries his nose in the mire again, and waddles down the gutter: comforting himself with the reflection that there is one snout the less to anticipate stray cabbage-stalks, at any rate.

They are the city scavengers, these pigs. Ugly brutes they are; having, for the most part, scanty brown backs, like the lids of old horsehair trunks: spotted with unwholesome black blotches. They have long, gaunt legs, too, and such peaked snouts, that if one of them could be persuaded to sit for his profile, nobody would recognise it for a
pig's likeness. They are never attended upon, or fed, or driven, or caught, but are thrown upon their own resources in early life, and become preternaturally knowing in consequence. Every pig knows where he lives, much better than anybody could tell him. At this hour, just as evening is closing in, you will see them roaming towards bed by scores, eating their way to the last. Occasionally, some youth among them who has over-eaten himself, or has been worried by dogs, trots shrinkingly homeward, like a prodigal son: but this is a rare case: perfect self-possession and self-reliance, and immovable composure, being their foremost attributes....

Let us go on again; and passing this wilderness of an hotel with stores about its base, like some Continental theatre, or the London Opera House shorn of its colonnade, plunge into the Five Points. But it is needful, first, that we take as our escort these two heads of the police, whom you would know for sharp and well-trained officers if you met them in the Great Desert. So true it is, that certain pursuits, wherever carried on, will stamp men with the same character. These two might have been begotten, born, and bred, in Bow Street.

We have seen no beggars in the streets by night or day; but of other kinds of strollers, plenty. Poverty, wretchedness, and vice, are rife enough where we are going now.

This is the place: these narrow ways, diverging to the right and left, and reeking everywhere with dirt and filth. Such lives as are led here, bear the same fruits here as elsewhere. The coarse and bloated faces at the doors, have counterparts at home, and all the wide world over. Debauchery has made the very houses prematurely old. See how the rotten beams are tumbling down, and how the patched and broken windows seem to scowl dimly, like eyes that have been hurt in drunken frays. Many of those pigs live here. Do they ever wonder why their masters walk upright in lieu of going on all-fours? and why they talk instead of grunting?

So far, nearly every house is a low tavern; and on the bar-room walls are coloured prints of Washington, and Queen Victoria of England, and the American Eagle. Among the pigeon-holes that hold the bottles, are pieces of plate-glass and coloured paper, for there is, in some sort, a taste for decoration, even here. And as seamen frequent these haunts, there are maritime pictures by the dozen: of partings between sailors and their lady-loves, portraits of William, of the ballad, and his Black-Eyed Susan; of Will Watch the Bold Smuggler; of Paul Jones the Pirate, and the like: on which the panted eyes of Queen Victoria, and of Washington to boot, rest in as strange companionship, as on most of the scenes that are enacted in their wondring presence.

What place is this, to which the squalid street conducts us? A kind of square of leprous houses, some of which are attainable only by crazy wooden stairs without. What lies beyond this tottering flight of steps, that creak beneath our tread?—a miserable room, lighted by one dim candle, and destitute of all comfort, save that which may be hidden in a wretched bed. Beside it, sits a man: his elbows on his knees: his forehead hidden in his hands. "What ails that man?" asks the foremost officer. "Fever," he sullenly replies, without looking up. Conceive the fancies of a feverish brain, in such a place as this!

Ascend these pitch-dark stairs, heedful of a false footing on the trembling boards, and grope your way with me
into this wolfish den, where neither ray of light nor breath of air, appears to come. A negro lad, startled from his sleep by the officer's voice—he knows it well—but comforted by his assurance that he has not come on business, officiously bestirs himself to light a candle. The match flickers for a moment, and shows great mounds of dusty rags upon the ground; then dies away and leaves a denser darkness than before, if there can be degrees in such extremes. He stumbles down the stairs and presently comes back, shading a flaring taper with his hand. Then the mounds of rags are seen to be astir, and rise slowly up, and the floor is covered with heaps of negro women, waking from their sleep: their white teeth chattering, and their bright eyes glistening and winking on all sides with surprise and fear, like the countless repetition of one astonished African face in some strange mirror.

Mount up these other stairs with no less caution (there are traps and pitfalls here, for those who are not so well escorted as ourselves) into the housetop; where the bare beams and rafters meet overhead, and calm night looks down through the crevices in the roof. Open the door of one of these cramped hutches full of sleeping negroes. Pah! They have a charcoal fire within; there is a smell of singeing clothes, or flesh, so close they gather round the brazier; and vapours issue forth that blind and suffocate. From every corner, as you glance about you in these dark retreats, some figure crawls half-awakened, as if the judgment-hour were near at hand, and every obscene grave were giving up its dead. Where dogs would howl to lie, women, and men, and boys slink off to sleep, forcing the dislodged rats to move away in quest of better lodgings.

Here too are lanes and alleys, paved with mud knee-deep, underground chambers, where they dance and game; the walls bedecked with rough designs of ships, and forts, and flags, and American eagles out of number: ruined houses, open to the street, whence, through wide gaps in the walls, other ruins loom upon the eye, as though the world of vice and misery had nothing else to show: hideous tenements which take their name from robbery and murder: all that is loathsome, drooping, and decayed is here.

Our leader has his hand upon the latch of "Almack's," and calls to us from the bottom of the steps; for the assembly-room of the Five Point fashionables is approached by a descent. Shall we go in? It is but a moment.

Heyday! the landlady of Almack's thrives! A buxom fat mulatto woman, with sparkling eyes, whose head is daintily ornamented with a handkerchief of many colours. Nor is the landlord much behind her in his finery, being attired in a smart blue jacket, like a ship's steward, with a thick gold ring upon his little finger, and round his neck a gleaming golden watch-guard. How glad he is to see us! What will we please to call for? A dance? It shall be done directly, sir: "a regular break-down."

The corpulent black fiddler, and his friend who plays the tambourine, stamp upon the boarding of the small raised orchestra in which they sit, and play a lively measure. Five or six couples come upon the floor, marshalled by a lively young negro, who is the wit of the assembly, and the greatest dancer known. He never leaves off making queer faces, and is the delight of all the rest, who grin from ear to ear incessantly. Among the dancers are two young mulatto girls, with large, black, drooping eyes, and head-gear after the fashion of the hostess, who are as shy,
or feign to be, as though they never danced before, and so look down before the visitors, that their partners can see
nothing but the long fringed lashes.

But the dance commences. Every gentleman sets as long as he likes to the opposite lady, and the opposite lady to
him, and all are so long about it that the sport begins to languish, when suddenly the lively hero dashes in to the
rescue. Instantly the fiddler grins, and goes at it tooth and nail; there is new energy in the tambourine; new laughter
in the dancers; new smiles in the landlady; new confidence in the landlord; new brightness in the very candles.

Single shuffle, double shuffle, cut and cross-cut; snapping his fingers, rolling his eyes, turning in his knees,
presenting the backs of his legs in front, spinning about on his toes and heels like nothing but the man's fingers on
the tambourine; dancing with two left legs, two right legs, two wooden legs, two wire legs, two spring legs—all
sorts of legs and no legs—what is tins to him? And in what walk of life, or dance of life, does man ever get such
stimulating applause as thunders about him, when, having danced his partner off her feet, and himself too, he
finishes by leaping gloriously on the bar-counter, and calling for something to drink, with the chuckle of a milieu yf
counterfeit Jim Crows, in one inimitable sound!

The air, even in these distempered parts, is fresh after the stifling atmosphere of the houses; and now, as we
emerge into a broader street, it blow? upon us with a purer breath, and the stars look bright again. Here are The
Tombs once more. The city watch-house is a part of the building. It follows naturally on the sights we have just left.
Let us see that, and then to bed....

What is this intolerable tolling of great bells, and crashing of wheels, and shouting in the distance? A fire. And
what that deep red light in the opposite direction? Another fire. And what these charred and blackened walls we
stand before? A dwelling where a fire has been. It was more than hinted, in an official report, not long ago, that
some of these conflagrations were not wholly accidental, and that speculation and enterprise found a field of ex-
ertion, even in flames: but be this as it may, there was a fire last night, there are two to-night, and you may lay an
even wager there will be at least one, tomorrow. So, carrying that with us for our comfort, let us say, Good night,
and climb up-stairs to bed... .

At a short distance from this building is another called the Alms House, that is to say, the workhouse of New
York. This is a large Institution also: lodging, I believe, when I was there, nearly a thousand poor. It was badly
ventilated, and badly lighted; was not too clean;—and impressed me, on the whole, very uncomfortably. But it must
be remembered that New York, as a great emporium of commerce, and as a place of general resort, not only from
all parts of the States, but from most parts of the world, has always a large pauper population to provide for; and
labours, therefore, under peculiar difficulties in this respect. Nor must it be forgotten that New York is a large town,
and that in all large towns a vast amount of good and evil is intermixed and jumbled up together.

In the same neighbourhood is the Farm, where young orphans are nursed and bred. I did not see it, but I believe
it is well conducted; and I can the more easily credit it, from knowing how mindful they usually are, in America, of
that beautiful passage in the Litany which remembers all sick persons and young children.

I was taken to these Institutions by water, in a boat belonging to the Island jail, and rowed by a crew of prisoners, who were dressed in a striped uniform of black and buff, in which they looked like faded tigers. They took me, by the same conveyance, to the jail itself.

It is an old prison, and quite a pioneer establishment, on the plan I have already described. I was glad to hear this, for it is unquestionably a very indifferent one. The most is made, however, of the means it possesses, and it is as well regulated as such a place can be.

In addition to these establishments, there are in New York, excellent hospitals and schools, literary institutions and libraries; an admirable fire department (as indeed it should be, having constant practice), and charities of every sort and kind. In the suburbs there is a spacious cemetery: unfinished yet, but every day improving. The saddest tomb I saw there was "The Stringers' Grave. Dedicated to the different hotels in this city."

There are three principal theatres. Two of them, the Park and the Bowery, are large, elegant, and handsome buildings, and are, I grieve to write it, generally deserted. The third, the Olympic, is a tiny show-box for vaudevilles and burlesques. It is singularly well conducted by Mr. Mitchell, a comic actor of great quiet humour and originality, who is well remembered and esteemed by London playgoers. I am happy to report of this deserving gentleman, that his benches are usually well filled, and that his theatre rings with merriment every night. I had almost forgotten a small summer theatre, called Niblo's, with gardens and open air amusements attached; but I believe it is not exempt from the general depression under which Theatrical Property, or what is humorously called by that name, unfortunately labours.

The tone of the best society in this city, is like that of Boston; here and there, it may be, with a greater infusion of the mercantile spirit, but generally polished and refined, and always most hospitable. The houses and tables are elegant; the hours later and more rakish; and there is, perhaps, a greater spirit of contention in reference to appearances, and the display of wealth and costly living. The ladies are singularly beautiful.