

“Tough Little Specimens of the light-weight order:” The Establishment of Lightweight Prize-Fighting in the United States during the 1850s

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Abstract: The 1850s were a pivotal decade for lightweight prize-fighting in the United States. Records of these athletes originate from contemporary newspaper publications and primary source documents. These publications, particularly the *New York Clipper*, reveal a great deal about cultural sentiments towards this popular, yet, illegal sport. In this article, I utilize these documents to argue that athletes such as Patrick Brannigan, James Hart, John Monaghan, Charley Lynch, and ‘Young’ Barney Aaron laid the foundation for American lightweight prize-fighting in subsequent decades. The careers, and lives, of these athletes have seldom, or never, been discussed since the time they were active in the prize-ring.

Keywords: prize-fighting, boxing, nineteenth-century, lightweights

Research objectives and source materials

While publications discussing the history of boxing have been in circulation for over two centuries, this article is the first to establish the origins of lightweight prize-fighters in the United States. Nat Fleischer mentioned some of these athletes in his *Ring Record Book*, however the information presented is cursory, and, at times, incorrect.¹ My research expands, and corrects, previous sources by accurately recording events—both of prize-ring contests, and aspects of these athletes’ daily lives. I elected not to discuss details of London Prize Ring Rules used during this time, as I believe these rules have been adequately discussed in several earlier publications.²

As a research objective, I focus on synthesizing primary source documents, and limit personal commentary. As the first article on this topic, I feel personal commentary could bias future scholarship. A great deal of this article’s information comes from early publications of the *New York Clipper*—many of which have been digitized by the Illinois Digital Newspaper Collections and should be seen as an

invaluable resource to scholars of mid-nineteenth century American sport. Newspaper articles made accessible by Harry Shaffer complemented the *Clipper* collection. While Shaffer’s ‘clippings’ are valuable additions, some sources lack provenience details, such as original newspaper page numbers. Resources were also acquired from the New York Public Library microfilm collection, through accessing online databases, and from articles housed at the International Boxing Hall of Fame. I also explored census records from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, county death ledgers, and have had personal correspondence with a distant relative of ‘Young’ Barney Aaron. Rarely do I include sources written after an athlete’s death.

While utilizing the term, ‘lightweight,’ I acknowledge the weight classes employed in modern boxing were not extant in the mid-nineteenth century. Instead, athletes would agree upon a predetermined ‘set-weight,’ which would be validated before the contest to ensure agreement loyalty. For the purpose of this article, I designate ‘lightweights’ as athletes weighing 135 pounds or less—the weight

recognized by all modern boxing organizations. In short, the term 'lightweight' should be understood as a title frequently used by contemporary sources to describe smaller prize-fighters, rather than a mandated weight class.

Historical background

Organized prize-fighting in the United States had occurred since the 1700s, however it was not until the 1849 contest between Tom Hyer and Yankee Sullivan that documentation for the sport greatly escalated. A statement in the *New York Evening Mirror* that same year provides an interesting perspective of mid-nineteenth-century American prize-fighting: "the laws forbid prize fighting, but in spite of the mawkish twaddle which we daily see in the newspapers ... we are inclined to believe from other manifestations, that public feeling is decidedly favorable to the fight. There are certainly much worse vices tolerated and encouraged by society than prize fighting..."³ Prize-fighting was illegal, but by the early 1850s, many labor workers found that the sport's profit and prestige outweighed legal ramifications.⁴ Regularly, victorious fighters made fifty dollars or more—some fifty times the average daily wage for a non-skilled laborer.⁵ In the sport's growing popularity, New York emerged as the capital of prize-fighting, but Irish immigrants in Boston rapidly cultivated contests in New England.⁶ By the late 1850s, prize-fights frequently occurred as far north as southern Ontario, as far south as Louisiana, and as far west as Ohio.

Taverns had emerged as important centers for developing American sports since the colonial era, and, as historian Elliott Gorn asserts, the success of early prize-fighting was fostered by means of an oral culture in such establishments. Over a drink, saloons provided patrons the opportunity to discuss prize-ring affairs, to organize future events, and, at times, offered venues for sparring exhibitions. It is little wonder why prize-fighters, themselves, opened taverns—they placed themselves "at the center of an informal, community-based network of

prize ring activities," while also providing a subsidized income.⁷

Frank Queen, founder of *The New York Clipper*, argued prize-fighting increased physical health and provided a favorable alternative to less agreeable forms of violence. From the very first publication, the *Clipper* documented the daily whereabouts of prize-fighters, upcoming contests, and challenges. In a literal sense, Queen took local saloon bantering and disseminated it to a wider audience in print. His publication also solidified contemporary pugilists' place within a lineage dating back to the early 1700s by regularly printing excerpts from Pierce Egan's *Boxiana*: "putting working men in touch with a glorious past."⁸ By the mid-1850s several newspapers followed suit—covering advancements of the sport with varying degrees of favoritism. These publications established the legacies of early American prize-fighters and provide access into researching the origins of the first American lightweights.

The first American lightweight prize-fighters

Patrick Timony's 1849 printing of *The American Fistiana* did much to enhance the legacy of heavier athletes—such as Yankee Sullivan and Thomas Hyer, however no American lightweights are recorded until Queen's establishment of the *New York Clipper*. By contrast, documentation of smaller English prize fighters had been thoroughly recorded since Pierce Egan's 1812 printing of *Boxiana*. Interestingly, Johnny Walker (1819-1888), who had claimed the Lightweight Championship of England in 1842, left for the United States after a contest with Tom Lane in February 1848. During this time, he opened a saloon in Philadelphia with his younger brother Alfred Walker, and remained in the city until his return to England in July 1853.⁹ While in the United States, Walker likely partook in sparring exhibitions, but never in a formal prize-fight.

The earliest documented lightweight contest is the 'Centre Market Novice's' six-round victory in New York over 'Big Jim' in September 1853. The 120 pound 'Novice' immediately

challenged anyone at his respective weight, however his alias is subsequently not mentioned. Other lightweights can be found within pages of the *Clipper* during 1853/4: Dublin's Ned Hogan, 'Soger' (who defeated one 'Young Ross'), and William Toal (alias 'Derry Youth')—who appears to have primarily engaged in sparring exhibitions.¹⁰ While the above athletes gained momentary recognition in sporting circles, and the pages of the *Clipper*, the alias 'Scotty of Brooklyn' became the first to assert longevity.

Patrick Brannigan (alias 'Scotty of Brooklyn'), born in 1836 in Glasgow, Scotland, stood 5 feet 4 ½ inches and weighed approximately 125 pounds.¹¹ It is unclear when he traveled to the United States, but by 1854 he had gained a reputation as a teenage prize fighter. The 1860 census recorded a Scottish-born, twenty-four year old, Patrick Brannigan living as a plasterer in the Tenth Ward in Brooklyn with his parents—Peter and Mary Brannigan.¹² If this is the same Brannigan, it would indicate he likely resided with his family during the entirety of his prize-fighting career.

In April 1854, Brannigan sparred at Grand-Street Hall in New York City before issuing an unanswered challenge to fight Patrick Keirnan.¹³ He partook in exhibitions for most of 1854,¹⁴ but on December 6 pled guilty to manslaughter for killing a man who had aggravated him several months earlier. He was sentenced to ten months imprisonment, and his name does not appear in the prize-ring until 1856.¹⁵ Following his release, an article published in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* branded Brannigan as a reproachful citizen: "This Scotty united the characters of thief, ruffian and general nuisance. The authorities ought to exterminate these vermin as they would rats."¹⁶

Meanwhile, James Hart (alias 'Little Jimmy') and John Monaghan¹⁷ solidified Boston as a center for New England prize-fighting. James Hart, born "Martin Hart," in Hyde, Cheshire, England in 1831,¹⁸ stood 5 feet 5 inches and weighed approximately 130 pounds. While

Hart appears to have traveled to the United States prior to the 1851 census, this document records the family of Michael and Bridget Hart, likely the parents of the prize-fighter, living in Hyde with five children.¹⁹ Hart's first appearance in the prize-ring occurred in New Orleans on January 9, 1855 against John Kelly. Hart won \$500 for defeating his opponent in thirty-nine rounds/fifty-five minutes. He settled in Boston shortly after the contest, and opened a saloon at 210 North Street.²⁰ His soon-to-be rival, John Monaghan, was born in Liverpool, England in 1830. Standing 5 feet 4 ½ inches, his normal bodyweight was approximately the same as Hart. Monaghan likely came to the United States around 1853/4, but details of his early life remain obscure.²¹ The 1855 issue of *American Fisticiana* recorded he had resided in New York prior to moving to Boston.

After several months of preparation, Hart and Monaghan met for a purse of \$300 on December 18, 1855 near "Island Pond" in Canada. The contest drew some two hundred spectators from throughout the northeast. The two men and their trainers ventured to the site location on December 15, and remained at Green Mountain House until the day of the event. After a twenty mile journey, a suitable location for the contest was found—near a home, where the residents permitted the athletes access to warmth prior to commencing the event. The weather was extremely frigid, and the ground was deemed too frozen to level after the ring was pitched. Both fighters entered the ring at approximately eleven o'clock.²²

Round one began with Hart delivering a solid shot to Monaghan's forehead—drawing first blood. Monaghan countered with an attack to Hart's ribs and nose before throwing his opponent. Hart injured his hand in the second round while throwing Monaghan, and his compromised appendage ultimately determined the outcome of the contest. In round ten, Monaghan received a blow to the cheek, which the *Clipper* recorded to be the hardest received in the fight. Despite his injury, Hart held a slight advantage, but this, coupled with the freezing

December air, rapidly exhausted his will to fight. Both concluded the forty-fourth round by falling together, and after Monaghan promptly rose to begin round forty-five, Hart left his corner exclaiming, “I won’t.” He went over to shake Monaghan’s hand, and the sponge was officially thrown into the ring after fifty-one minutes of fighting.²³

Frustrated by the loss, Hart immediately challenged Monaghan to a return contest. The latter wished to wait only six weeks for a return match, but the injured Hart pleaded for six months to recover. In January 1856, Hart was challenged by John Roberts, but the challenge was not accepted.²⁴ His challenger, Roberts, engaged in several sparring exhibitions during the mid-1850s—including several against Hart’s occasional training partner, James Lafferty.²⁵

With the close of 1855, we first find the name of future International Boxing Hall of Fame inductee: ‘Young’ Barney Aaron. Both contemporary and modern sources generally record Aaron’s birth on July 27, 1836 at Duke’s Place, Aldgate, London, however personal correspondence with one of the Aaron family decedents, Bill Teschek, yielded census records which suggest his birth was in June 1833 in St. Botolph’s, London under the name “Abraham.” His father, ‘the original’ Barney Aaron, had several children with his wife Phoebe Lee, and had gained a reputation for being one of the best English Lightweights of the 1820s.²⁶ ‘Young’ Barney and his brothers doubtless were raised with stories of their fathers’ career, and this legacy influenced many of them to figure in the prize ring. The young lightweight, Barney, honored his father by adopting his alias: ‘The Star of the East.’ He was smaller than his father—standing 5 feet 5 inches, and weighing approximately 120 pounds. Father and son traveled to the United States in the mid-1850s, and on April 22, 1856, in Philadelphia, Aaron sparred Dan Dougherty in first recorded exhibition.²⁷ The *Clipper*’s account of the original Barney Aaron’s presence in the United States contradicts many publications stating he passed away in 1850.

Such sparring exhibitions became a means for prize-fighters to perfect their craft and gain public admiration. On April 28, a benefit was held at the National Varieties Hall in Boston. Two of James Hart’s students sparred in the third of eight contests, and were followed by an exhibition between Hart, himself, and Patrick Brannigan—who had recently resurfaced. Hart returned to the stage in the final contest to spar with Ed Price. In an appeal to the crowd, Price mocked being knocked out by his opponent. On May 1, a benefit was held for ‘Young’ Barney Aaron at Franklin Hall in Philadelphia. That evening Aaron sparred with Dan Smith (alias ‘Young Bendigo’), and on May 19, the two men sparred again—this time at the Pocahontas Gymnasium and Sparring Club. That same evening, Hart sparred with James Lafferty, and Brannigan against Young Colbert at the National Varieties Hall in Boston.²⁸

Although he had already figured in sparring exhibitions, Barney Aaron’s first official encounter was against Johnny Robinson amid the presence of three hundred spectators on July 9, 1856 on Riker’s Island. Aaron’s opponent was born in Manchester, England around 1835, and had settled in New York where he opened a bar, “Sporting Museum,” located at 114 Madison Street. The principal parties for the contest boarded a vessel shortly after midnight and arrived at the island approximately two hours later. Aaron won the coin toss for corner section, but odds favored Robinson.²⁹

Aaron was thrown in the opening round, but thereafter dominated the contest—felling Robinson nearly every round.³⁰ An account published in the *New York Times* recorded the fight as an unscientific affair, with both men covered in cuts and bruises. The unfavorable *Times* article concludes: “The police, we understand, are determined to arrest the blackguards engaged in this affair. We hope they will do so.” Contrary to the *Times* account, *American Fistiana* of 1856 documented the event as “a remarkably fine fight, and both men showed admirable science.” After eighty-one rounds/135 minutes, Aaron emerged victorious

and obtained the \$100 purse. Members of the Thirteenth Ward police received word of the contest, but were unsuccessful in intercepting the boat which brought the parties back to New York City.³¹

John Monaghan, who had remained elusive for the first months of 1856, finally agreed upon a return contest with James Hart. Shortly after, he was recorded in a sparring exhibition with Patrick Brannigan. James Lafferty, Hart's training partner and fellow lightweight, had signed to meet Barney Ford for a contest in July. Both Hart and Lafferty commenced training under the supervision of Bill Regan.³² Lafferty met Ford on July 15, 1856 in Rhode Island, and the former commanded the contest—scoring first blood in the opening round, and winning after thirty-five rounds.³³

On July 19, only four days after Lafferty's victory over Ford, a very small crowd on an island near Beverly, Massachusetts witnessed the second contest between Monaghan and Hart. Hart, presenting black 'colors,' weighed approximately 130 pounds, while his opponent, weighing some three pounds less, displayed white and green. Monaghan obtained the first knock down in the opening round, but violated the rules in subsequent rounds by falling at least two times without receiving a blow. The final time, occurring in the tenth round, resulted in his disqualification. Hart received a purse of \$300 for winning the fifteen minute contest.³⁴

For the next several months, Hart prioritized his business as a saloonkeeper. In October 1856, he moved the location to 57/59 Elm Street in Boston—naming it "Sportsman's Hall." A December *Clipper* article praised Hart for his hospitality: "To strangers, Mr. Hart is as affable and courteous as he is to old acquaintances, and who ever calls upon him is sure to be made welcome and comfortable."³⁵ His saloon was moved again around May 1857—this time to No. 2 People's Ferry under the name "The Stranger's Retreat."³⁶ Hart's popularity increased, and the *Clipper* advertised the printing of a full-length lithograph of the

lightweight.³⁷ Unfortunately, no lithograph of Hart has been located—nor has any rendition of Monaghan, Brannigan, or many others mentioned within this article.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, John Monaghan rarely utilized the pages of the *Clipper* to issue challenges to his opponents. Consequently, documentation of his life remains obscure. In August 1856, James Hart and his acquaintance, James Lafferty, called upon Monaghan for a third contest while the latter was in New York. Lafferty, himself, then challenged Monaghan shortly after sparring John Roberts and 'The Macedonian,' but the discreet prize-fighter did not accept. While in New York, Monaghan did, however, spar with Barney Aaron and had begun making preparations to battle Charley Lynch in the middle of September, but these negotiations, too, fell through.³⁸

The Kelly/Lynch tragedy of 1856

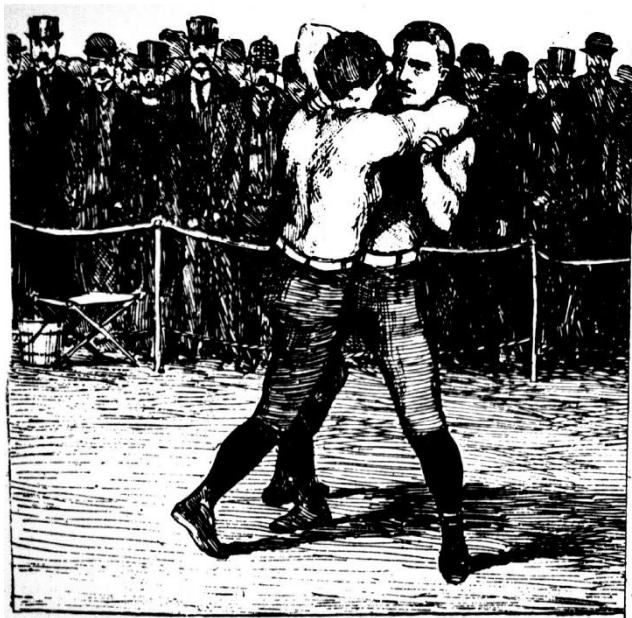
Charley Lynch, born around 1831 in New York, stood 5 feet 3 ½ inches, and weighed approximately 115 pounds. In early 1856, he had a drunken affray with Jack Montgomery where he received a severe cut on his neck from a cheese-knife. Ironically, after recovering, Lynch and Montgomery became close friends, and, shortly after, the former opened his own saloon, "Bandbox" on Walter-Street. The *New York Times* derided his establishment as "a resort for the vicious of both sexes, and the source of much annoyance to the police." By early 1856, Lynch had emerged victorious in three prize fights—in South Carolina and New York.³⁹ On May 8, he knocked out William Toal in the nineteenth round of a gloved contest at the Sportsman's Hall. That same month, he sparred with Charley Homes at the Shakespeare Hall and, in June, he and William Toal were challenged by a man named Brady for a prize-fight at 112 pounds.⁴⁰ Lynch, however, reported to the *Clipper* that as soon as he answered Brady's challenge, the latter became "as docile as a kitten."⁴¹

Lynch's next adversary, Andy Kelly, was born in England around 1834, and arrived in the United States in the early 1850s. He stood 5 feet

5 inches and was thin—often weighing less than 110 pounds. He had figured in numerous exhibitions, including one with Barney Aaron on August 19, 1856 at Chelsea Manor House. According to the *New York Times*, Kelly was persuaded by friends to battle Lynch, and began training at George Kennett's place in Fordham.⁴² On August 29, after another exhibition, Kelly caught a severe cold, and claims persisted that he had not fully recovered prior to his contest with Lynch.⁴³

Kelly and Lynch, touted as “tough little specimens of the light-weight order” by the *Clipper*, were matched on September 18, 1856 at the Palisades on the New Jersey shore. Some two hundred spectators witnessed the contest.⁴⁴ The *Times* recorded the event as: “one of the severest mills that has ever taken place in the American ring.”⁴⁵ In round six, Kelly landed

severe blows to Lynch's head and body, but slipped to the ground, laughing. For the first four dozen rounds the contest was very close, but odds were slightly in Kelly's favor by round fifty-five. By the end of the seventy-seventh round, odds were twelve to one in Kelly's favor, and Lynch emerged for the next round spitting blood. Kelly, however, began to show severe signs of fatigue, and at the start of round eighty-five, he appeared disoriented. At the call of “time” for round eighty-six Kelly took two steps from his second's knee before collapsing to the ground. He was carried to the steamboat, and was taken shortly after to Bellevue Hospital—being left under false pretenses.⁴⁶ He died shortly thereafter from what was deemed a brain clot. His death was mourned not only by the fistic fraternity, but his two aunts with whom he lived, and an unnamed prostitute.⁴⁷



THEY WRESTLED.



DOWN WENT THE VICTIM

Depictions of the Kelly/Lynch contest. Note, the right image showing Lynch knocking Kelly down—a scene which does not accurately represent the conclusion of the contest (Sam Andre and Nat Fleischer, *A Pictorial History of Boxing*, (New Jersey, Citadel Press, 1987), 358).

A well-publicized trial ensued, and warrants were issued for the arrest of Lynch and the principal seconds (including Barney Aaron). Fearing arrest, Aaron fled south to New Orleans, while Lynch promptly left for England, where he immediately continued his prize-fighting career. Lynch fought often in England, and by the time of his return to the United States in 1860, was acknowledged as an English Lightweight Champion. The death of Kelly prompted the *New York Times* to reprint accounts of former tragedies in the American prize-ring, and the police were vigil in their attempts to prevent subsequent contests.⁴⁸

Only three days after the tragedy, authorities intervened before the start of a match between Patrick Brannigan and William Murphy (alias 'Murphy of Portland') at Spot Pond, about six miles from Boston.⁴⁹ During the intervention, a member of the police was injured by gun fire. About twenty of the spectators were taken into custody to the East Cambridge Jail. Both Brannigan and Murphy evaded arrest.⁵⁰ A predictably scathing *Times* article printed: "It is almost time that prize-fighters were put within granite walls and iron bars."⁵¹ Public perception of prize-fighting in the northeast was noticeably unfavorable. Numerous contests were scheduled, but few occurred. In October, Johnny Roach was arrested by the Fourth Ward Police for his participation in the Kelly/Lynch contest, and James Hart, who had spent three months recovering from a severe illness, was arrested in early 1857 for assisting in a Massachusetts contest.⁵²

Prize-fighting in the wake of tragedy and the first Lightweight Championship of America

Barney Aaron, still evading authorities in Louisiana, met his second opponent, Bill Evans, near the Metairie Race Course in New Orleans on April 12, 1857 for a purse of \$500. Evans had gained recognition as a prominent fighter and was viewed "as almost invincible by the New Orleans sports."⁵³ A group of nearly one thousand spectators, including two hundred women, converged for the contest. Evans was

favorable the winner, but by the end of the first round, odds favored his opponent ten to one. 'The Star of the East' was reportedly "scarcely scratched" and dominated the contest until it was stopped after eleven rounds/fifteen minutes.⁵⁴ Aaron returned to the northeast shortly after the contest and sparred "one of the Quaker City pugilists for \$75 a side" in Philadelphia, before being arrested in New York on May 9.⁵⁵ His sentence was short, as his name is soon found in the sparring circuit.

During a short period in Philadelphia, Patrick Brannigan openly challenged anyone at his respective weight—which was promptly accepted by Dan Smith ('Young Bendigo').⁵⁶ Smith had already engaged in two contests—the first against Jim Smith ('The Belfast Barber'), resulted in the two serving some months in prison after police intervention. Upon his release, Smith fought Young Claywood in December 1856 and won the contest after his opponent committed a foul.⁵⁷

The Brannigan/Smith contest was held in a cellar, which had originally been fitted as a dog fighting pit, on May 8, 1857 amid the presence of approximately fifty spectators.⁵⁸ Slight adjustments to the London Prize Rules were made as the ring did not meet standard specifications. Smith scored first blood after he opened a small cut on his opponent's cheek in round three, however Brannigan was the better boxer, and Smith ended nearly every round on his knees. In all, approximately fifteen claims of foul were made by Smith's party in an effort to obtain victory. Brannigan's party, in turn, argued that Smith repeatedly violated the rules by falling without receiving a blow. After the forty-ninth round, another claim of foul was made and the referee was persuaded to declare Smith the victor.⁵⁹ Most considered Brannigan wrongfully disqualified, and Smith was criticized in the *Clipper* for his tactics. Brannigan challenged Smith for a return contest, but the latter evaded, claiming: "he knows I would not fight for money, after I had defeated him so easily."⁶⁰ Joseph Aitken subsequently challenged Brannigan, but the latter chose to return to New York where he

engaged in several exhibitions with Daniel Kerrigan.⁶¹

By 1857, the popularity of Kerrigan's Saloon made it one of the most desirable venues for sparring exhibitions. On July 21, Brannigan sparred Cheek Hares and Edward Touhey (~1839-1905) boxed a man named Gallagher. The main event was an exhibition between Johnny Lazarus and Young Donnelly, which was recorded as "one of the best displays that ever took place" in the establishment.⁶² Daniel Kerrigan, owner of the Saloon, was born in 1843 in New York and received his public education before attending a Catholic seminary.⁶³ By the late 1850s, the 135-140 pound Kerrigan emerged as a fixture in the prize-ring—sparring in exhibitions and serving as a corner man for several prize-fights. On February 21, 1858, he vanquished Hen Winkle in New Orleans and, on January 4, 1859, defeated an athlete named Jones, in New Hampshire. In August 1860 he was victorious over 'Australian' James Kelly in a contest which lasted nearly three and a half hours. He died on January 26, 1880.⁶⁴

On September 2, 1857, Hart and Monaghan prepared to battle for a third time near Calf Island in the Boston Harbor, but the police were successful in intervening. Captain Tarleton, of the Harbor Police, observed a steamboat leaving Long Wharf carrying several people who had paid two dollars to witness the contest. The steamboat's passengers were alert to Tarleton's monitoring and, with the exception of one stop, floated about the harbor until returning home. Though no arrests were made, the police "had the satisfaction of having preserved the public peace and prevented a fight, and is deserving of credit for his preserving efforts."⁶⁵

Modern sources, including Nat Fleischer's *Ring Record Book*, generally cite the 1857 prize-fight between John Monaghan and Barney Aaron as for the Lightweight Championship of America. I argue this contest has been incorrectly branded as a 'title' match by mid-twentieth century scholars to retroactively

establish an obscure championship lineage. During my research I located several contemporary accounts of this contest, but none mentioning it as a championship contest.

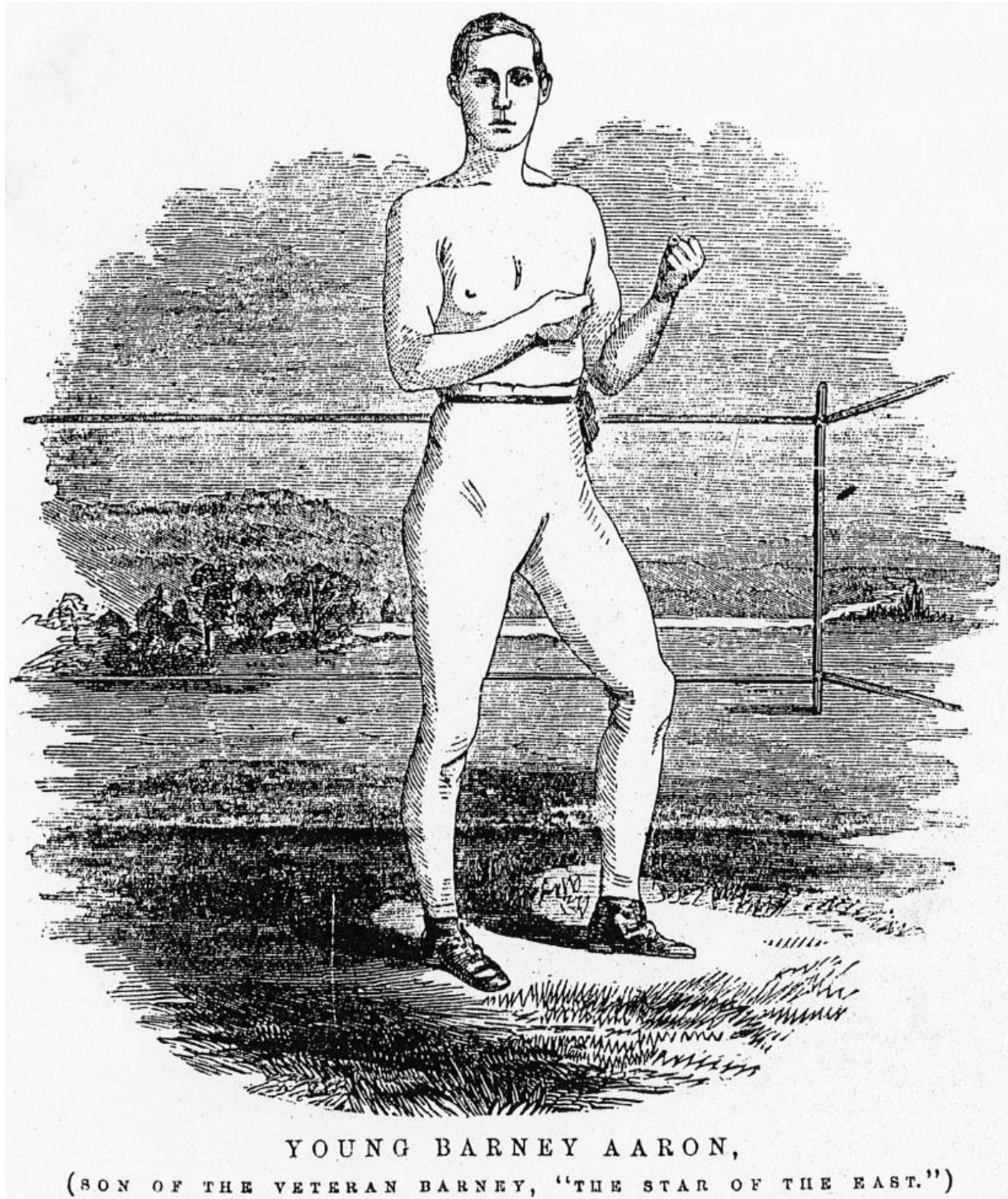
After some deliberation, Providence, Rhode Island was chosen as the site for the September 28, 1857 Monaghan/Aaron contest. Approximately 150 spectators paid five dollars to ride a Providence steamer to the site location, but the two fought for a mere purse of \$100. The police received word of the contest, but were unsuccessful in finding the precise location. For the contest, Aaron, who displayed all black 'colors' in his corner, weighed approximately 120 pounds—some ten pounds lighter than his opponent—who displayed blue and white. Phillip Perkins, of Boston, served as referee for the contest.⁶⁶

Monaghan commenced the opening round with a blow to Aaron's ribs, but the latter countered to his opponent's right eye—resulting in first blood. Aaron struck Monaghan's throat in round two, and obtained the first knock down of the contest. At the end of the third round, Monaghan was bleeding heavily, and by round sixteen, odds fell heavily in Aaron's favor. By round fifty-one, the athletes had been dueling for two hours. One of Monaghan's eyes was completely closed, and the other visibly swelling. Cries of "take Monaghan away" were heard, but the battered athlete refused to quit. By round sixty-one, Monaghan lost all power behind his punches, and Aaron simply waited for the opportunity to send his opponent to the ground. Finally, in the eightieth round, Monaghan's corner threw in the sponge, and Aaron was declared the winner after 202 minutes of fighting. At the time, the contest was the longest ever recorded in the American prize-ring.⁶⁷

The parties returned to Boston by eight o'clock, and Aaron immediately proclaimed he was open to challenge any man in the world near 114 pounds.⁶⁸ In late October, he left for Philadelphia, and, upon returning to his home base of New York, ventured back to New Orleans.⁶⁹ Although Monaghan never attempted

a return match with Aaron, he continued his career as a prize-fighter for several years. On November 23, 1857 he engaged in an exhibition with his rival James Hart at Dudley Hall in Buffalo.

Several gloved exhibitions were held, with the two lightweights engaging in a “beautiful” three round display for the evening’s main event.⁷⁰



'Young' Barney Aaron, as depicted in the *Clipper* shortly after his victory over Monaghan (*New York Clipper*, 21 November 1857, p. 241).

Patrick Brannigan's story continued its colorful, if not sordid, course. On February 6, 1858, he sparred with the much older Jack Adams. Although Adams proved himself the superior boxer, the exhibition was overshadowed by the evening's main event—a fight between a small pit bull and a dog twice its size. Only five days later, Brannigan sparred twice at Kerrigan's Hall—the first against a greatly outclassed Fenton, of Manchester, and the second against Johnny Roach.⁷¹ At around four o'clock A.M, on March 3, Brannigan entered George Pell's saloon in Brooklyn with a man named James McCauley. The two assaulted a man named John Clayton, who called upon one George Pell for help. Clayton and Pell drove Brannigan and McCauley out of the bar, but not before Brannigan was stabbed several times with an ice pick. The following day *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported Brannigan "is said to be dangerously injured."⁷²

Brannigan's injuries were likely exaggerated, for he was soon engaging in sparring exhibitions—three at Kerrigan's Hall on May 31.⁷³ Between August and September 1857, Brannigan and Aaron had agreed to battle for a purse of \$500, but negotiations fell through.⁷⁴ By the time the two finally met on October 18, 1858 at Point Abino, near Fort Erie, Ontario for \$200, expectations of the contest were high, and the affair was recognized as for the Lightweight Championship of America. The *Clipper* exclaimed: "There is every reason to anticipate that the fight will prove an excellent one, as the manly character of both men and their great scientific knowledge of boxing are well known. We would strongly advise our sporting friends to embrace the opportunity of seeing this fight..."⁷⁵ Brannigan began his training at Williamsburg, Long Island under the supervision of Hen Winkle, and concluded it at Burt Scott's Hotel, near Buffalo. Aaron conditioned himself in Long Island under the watchful eye of Thomas Chaffers and Dan Kerrigan, and finished his training at Mr. Couthard's Waterloo Ferry Hotel—just over the Canadian border.⁷⁶

Approximately one thousand spectators were in attendance for the Championship contest, and just before two o'clock, the athletes made their way into the ring. Brannigan's 'colors' were displayed as emerald green. He was seconded by Johnny Roche, Kit Burns, and James Dorsay. Aaron revealed 'colors' of green and white checkered, and entered followed by Johnny Mackey, Con. Fitzgerald, and Thomas Chaffers. Aaron won the coin toss, and forced Brannigan to face the sun.⁷⁷ Louis Beiral, a former prize-fighter, acted as the referee for the contest.⁷⁸ Brannigan was approximately ten pounds heavier than his opponent.⁷⁹

Brannigan demonstrated his strength by throwing Aaron in the opening round. Aaron was thrown again in the second round—after which he held onto one of Brannigan's legs amid cries of "foul." Referee Beiral warned Aaron, but directed the athletes to resume the contest. In the third round, Brannigan landed blows to Aaron's body, but the latter delivered a left to his opponent's cheek—gaining first blood by "removing the bark of a recently healed scar." This round, again, ended with Aaron thrown. Aaron was again cautioned for a foul in round four, and while both fell in the fifth round, the following three rounds ended with Aaron on the ground. Round nine favored Aaron, who blocked an attack from Brannigan, before landing a solid right to his opponent's ribcage. In round ten, after a struggle, Aaron once more illegally seized the leg of Brannigan. A plea to the referee was made by Brannigan's seconds, and the referee Beiral declared it a "palpable foul"—proclaiming Brannigan the victor and Champion. *American Fisticiana* recorded the contest lasted only thirteen minutes.⁸⁰

Friends and spectators were bewildered by Aaron's tactics, and the *Clipper* speculated Young Barney had underestimated his opponent.⁸¹ No doubt frustrated, Aaron promptly issued a challenge to Brannigan. Tentative agreements were made for a purse between \$500 and \$1,000, however, a date could not be agreed upon and the two never fought again.⁸² Both Aaron and Brannigan

engaged in several exhibitions during 1859, but neither signed for a formal prize match.⁸³

The later exploits of Hart, Monaghan, Brannigan, and Aaron

By 1858, James Hart began to suffer from the heart disease, pericarditis, and his presence in the prize-ring faded. He briefly moved to St. Louis, but soon returned to his home of Boston. A benefit exhibit was scheduled for him on February 25, 1859, but he died eight days earlier on February 17. He was twenty-eight years old—leaving behind a wife and two children. His death was officially recorded in the Boston obituaries where he was registered as a labor worker. He was buried in Cambridge, Massachusetts and laid to rest by several members of the fistic fraternity.⁸⁴

Agreements were initially made for John Monaghan to battle Johnny Roberts in December 1858, however negotiations fell through, and Monaghan claimed a fifty dollar forfeit.⁸⁵ It was not until July 19, 1860 that Monaghan again entered the ring in New York in an “off-hand match” against Harry McLain of Philadelphia. Monaghan won the fierce eighty round/195 minute contest.⁸⁶ He served as a second in numerous contests in the early 1860s, and also engaged in a draw with 128 pound Steve O'Donnell,⁸⁷ but details of the contest are lacking.

The *Clipper* recorded that in November 1864 Murtha Downey and his gang attacked a drunk Monaghan. Downey and Monaghan first fought outside, but after Monaghan proved too much for Downey, the latter's gang attacked—robbing Monaghan of an expensive gold watch. Downey was arrested shortly after.⁸⁸ The last reference to Monaghan is his attendance in a failed prize fight between Joe Goss and Paddy Ryan on May 29, 1880. His later whereabouts, and death, remain unknown.⁸⁹

In August 1860, Patrick Brannigan was detained for throwing stones at a boy and his pigs. The Champion was working in a sewer when he and his co-worker were allegedly peppered with stones from the young boy. Both

parties hurled stones and were eventually taken into police custody where they were released shortly thereafter. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* provides an interesting commentary on the event: “Perhaps the most curious thing about this item is that the champion of the “Light Weights” should be allowed to come to the ignominy of attending the sewers! To what base uses may we come at last, if muscle is to be thus ignored?”⁹⁰

Brannigan appears to have made no attempt to defend his Lightweight crown, and his recognition as Champion soon fell out of favor. On June 4, 1881 the *Police Gazette* recorded that he was living in Sacramento, California—working as a wealthy ‘pound-master’ and periodically serving as a boxing referee. At some point he engaged in a contest with Doony Harris on a barge along the Sacramento River, but police were successful in intervening. His demise came on March 8, 1892 when George “Big Neck” Smith, a politician, shot and killed Brannigan after the two had a drunken dispute earlier in the day. Brannigan was married with five children, and had been working for contractors at City Hall. Smith, himself, was found innocent after a long trial.⁹¹

Between 1860 and 1861, Irish born Owney Geoghegan (1840-1885) issued a challenge to both John Monaghan and Patrick Brannigan, and modern sources generally acknowledge his victory over Edward Touhey on April 18, 1861 as for the Lightweight Championship of America. Geoghegan, however, retired in 1863, and it was not until 1866 that a clear lineage is restored. Barney Aaron, who had emerged from retirement in the 1860s, lost a bid for the Lightweight Championship against Sam Collyer (1842-1904) in 1866, but claimed the title by defeating Collyer the following year. While he relinquished his claim of Champion shortly after, Aaron continued to be active in the prize-ring until a very late age. He was taken to a sanitarium in Long Island around 1906, and his death was officially recorded by the *New York Times* on June 4, 1907 where he was said to have left

behind a wife and two daughters.⁹² Aaron was elected into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 2007.

Concluding remarks

American prize-fighters of the 1860s fought under a much more acknowledged banner. Patrick Brannigan, James Hart, John Monaghan, Barney Aaron, and the other athletes mentioned, could not have been conscious of the role they would play in solidifying the discipline of lightweight prize-fighting. These athletes, and the practices discussed within this article, illustrate not only the evolution of American boxing, but also broader social issues—such as mid-nineteenth century pastimes, labor wages, and idealizations of masculinity. Finally, the means by which printed media shaped public perceptions of this illegal

sport cannot be overstated. Newspaper coverage, specifically the *New York Clipper*, elevated prestige for the sport, which, in turn, established a more unified, regulated, and international prize-fighting discipline to the United States.

Despite being the most comprehensive article prepared on the subject, I acknowledge further research is still needed. There are numerous athletes who, regretfully, I lacked space to include within the scope of this article. I sincerely hope more information will be uncovered by way of newspapers, official ledgers, or family correspondence. If this article fosters renewed interest in these prize-fighters, and brings forward new information, I will consider this article an overwhelming success.

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⁹ *Police News*, October 1888; and "Training," *New York Clipper*, 30 July 1853.

¹⁰ "Prize Fight in New York," *New York Clipper*, 24 September 1853, "Ned Hogan, of Dublin," *New York Clipper*, 1 April 1854 and "Challenge," *New York Clipper*, 2 December 1854; "Prize Fight in Atlantic Garden," *New York Clipper*, 28 October 1854; and "Challenge," *New York Clipper*, 26 August 1854.

¹¹ *Police Gazette*, 18 December 1880 records that Brannigan was born in 1835.

¹² 1860 United States Federal Census: 1 June 1860, Place: 10th Ward Brooklyn City, Kings, New York, United States, Household ID: 1,547. Publication Number: M653: Page: 190. Microfilm Number: 803769. Image Number: 00612.

¹³ "John McMahon's Benefit," *New York Clipper*, 22 April 1854.

¹⁴ "The St. Charles in a Blaze of Glory," *New York Clipper*, 4 November 1854 records that Brannigan had an exhibition with Young Aaron (possibly 'Young' Barney Aaron), and "never fails to please, no matter with whom he puts on the gloves."

¹⁵ "Scotty of Brooklyn," *New York Clipper*, 16 December 1854.

¹⁶ *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 22 September 1856.

¹⁷ Sources often spelled Monaghan's name differently: including "Jack Monnegan," "Johnny Moneghan" and "John Monahan." I have chosen "John Monaghan" because it is the most frequently used in contemporary publications (such as the *New York Clipper*).

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