

Prologue: Rumble on the River

The most wicked men in New York City skimmed along the surface of the Hudson River. With the sun safely tucked beneath the horizon on the night of May 16, 1881, a tug hauled a barge laden with an unsavory cargo of pickpockets, gamblers, swindlers, drinkers, and drifters. Past the waterfront's forest of rocking masts, the motley menagerie crept up the liquid highway on a nefarious moonlight excursion.

As they nervously scanned the river for waterborne police, the four hundred outlaws bathed in the reflected glitter of America's greatest metropolis. On shore and under the yellow glare of Manhattan's gaslights, black-bonneted ladies in pinched corsets and cigar-chomping gentlemen with finely waxed mustaches and silk top hats promenaded to Broadway theaters. Sparkling carriages and hansom cabs rattled over a carpet of cobblestones past the Fifth Avenue palaces of the country's merchant princes. Beneath Delmonico's silver chandeliers and frescoed ceilings, the city's power brokers feasted on oysters and champagne as they peered out at the disembodied arm of the Statue of Liberty lifting its torch above Madison Square Park, a nagging reminder that the pedestal for the copper colossus remained unbuilt.

Behind New York's refined facade throbbed the Gilded Age's tarnished underbelly. Manhattan was an island of "unadulterated devilry" with infernal-sounding neighborhoods like "Hell's Half Acre" and "Satan's Circus." No city in the United States offered such an exquisite carnival of depravity. Inside New York's saloons and concert halls, patrons imbibed whiskey while their lascivious eyes drank in the dancing girls who flashed their thighs and sang bawdy tunes. Wealthy men carried published directories of the city's high-end brothels in the vest pockets of their double-breasted suits, but few directions were needed to locate any of the fifteen thousand prostitutes who infested the streets. Roulette wheels clattered inside gambling dens that literally operated in the shadows of police stations polluted with corruption. Crime flourished in a city teeming with disgusting displays of wealth and more appalling exhibitions of poverty.

Manhattan was one enormous red-light district, but there was a particular sin so taboo that it had been exiled from the island of vice—prizefighting. Boxing matches were primal affairs, savage human cockfights rife with bare-knuckle brawling, wrestling, biting, hair pulling, and eye gouging. In an 1879 championship bout, one slugger even poured turpentine on his hands to blind his opponent.

Prizefighting's brutality repulsed genteel Victorian elites, but not as much as the unscrupulous working-class fans the sport attracted. Boxing was a pillar of urban street culture, a popular pastime with immigrants, particularly the Irish, thirsty for blood and booze. Gambling saturated the sport. Clashes among knife- and pistol-wielding spectators often caused more violence than the gladiators inside the ring.

The savagery, corruption, and gambling endemic to prizefighting roamed so far beyond the bounds of Victorian-era sensibilities that most American jurisdictions outlawed the sport. Government, however, could not legislate away bloodlust. Brawlers and fans engaged in elaborate cat-and-mouse dances with the police and often found refuge in remote locations such as islands, backwoods, and cow pastures.

The scheming matchmakers who had secured the barge that now beat against the current of the Hudson River were sailing the sport into uncharted waters by choosing a battleground that lacked any ground whatsoever. Under the cover of darkness, the tugboat continued to urge the unlit barge upriver. Once they reached the tip of Manhattan at Spuyten Duyvil Creek (Dutch for "Spouting Devil"), the men ignited oil-soaked torches, backed by reflectors to prevent their being spotted from shore, and pitched the twenty-four-foot ring on the barge deck.

Despite their best efforts at secrecy, reports filtered back to the Twenty-Second Precinct that a large group of sporting men had slipped away from the pier at the foot of West Forty-Third Street a little after 9 p.m., most likely bound for a nearby island to stage a prizefight. The harbor police received orders to locate the "suspicious barge."

In the hopes of confusing any pursuing lawmen about which jurisdiction they would sully, the fight contingent's tug straddled the watery state line between New York and New Jersey. Finally, ten miles upriver, they halted near the New York suburb of Yonkers, and an anchor struck the murky midstream bed of the Hudson.

In the dimly lit reaches of the ring, a hulking figure with blankets draped over his broad shoulders sat huddled on a campstool. John L. Sullivan shivered lightly as he listened to the Hudson lap against the barge and felt the river roll softly beneath his feet. He breathed in the cool west breezes, fragrant with grass and trees that dissipated the fumes of whiskey and cigars hovering over the barge.

The twenty-three-year-old boxing phenom from Boston had been the chatter of the heavyweight class. Reportedly blessed with the perfect combination of speed, strength, and stamina, the slugger

had dominated every opponent he had faced. New York fight fans risked arrest and paid the steep ticket price of ten dollars to see him—and hopefully watch him get pounded by the city’s biggest brute, John Flood.

Outside of his manager, Billy Madden, and his second, Joe Goss, John L. had few friends in the heart of Gotham. The locals gave the scattered Sullivan backers on board 3–1 odds. When the “Boston Strong Boy” shed his blankets and stood stripped to his waist, however, Flood’s backers had second thoughts.

Muscular without being muscle-bound, Sullivan was constructed like a pugilistic product of the Industrial Age, a “wonderful engine of destruction” manifest in flesh and blood. The faint torchlight tickled his chiseled biceps and rippled back. It gleamed off his thick chest from which his deep bass voice rumbled. It lit up his enormous shoulder blades, which provided the necessary foundation to support his bull-like neck and bullet-shaped head. His clean-shaven chin glistened like polished granite, although darkness hid in the recesses of a deep dimple.

Sullivan’s pristine skin, full set of even teeth, and straight nose belied his profession and visibly testified to the inability of foes to lay a licking on him. His coarse black hair was closely cropped to prevent Flood from grabbing and pulling it during the fight. Even Sullivan’s one physical deficiency—his short, stubby legs—aided his quickness and ability to rapidly change positions. Among the greatest weapons this fighting machine possessed, however, were dark, piercing eyes. Sullivan could say terrible things with his ferocious stare, which often crushed opponents before he ever threw a punch. As he glared beneath his heavy black brows at his foe, those eyes blazed even brighter because John L. knew a clear victory would likely earn him a match with the reigning heavyweight champion, upstate New York’s Paddy Ryan, who was aboard the barge. Sullivan hungered so deeply for the title that, as much as he abhorred training, he had spent six weeks—every day since agreeing to the fight—tirelessly working with Madden.

Just north of five feet, ten inches tall, John L. arrived in New York in peak shape at 180 pounds. Flood carried a nearly identical build and had a reputation as a terrific hitter, though he lacked any ring experience. Flood was the toughest thug in the toughest neighborhood in America’s toughest city. The brawler had scrapped his way around the notorious Five Points slum, and his gang ruled the rough-and-tumble streets around the Bull’s Head horse market in lower Manhattan.

The fearsome “Bull’s Head Terror” brought his fellow toughs aboard, and a rumor spread around the floating ring that the gambling gang was prepared to do anything to prevent the loss of their man—

and their money. It wasn't uncommon for gamblers, when things were going south for their fighter, to cut the ropes, rush the ring, and prevent the conclusion of a fight. Goss heard that the ruffians even planned to throw Sullivan overboard, giving him a bath rather than taking one themselves. Madden, who began to wonder if he and his fellow Bostonians would make it off the barge alive, warned John L. to stay away from the ropes in case one of Flood's backers tried to gouge his eyes with a cane. The two sides wrangled over a referee, but Madden and Sullivan successfully held out for Al Smith, a fight-game veteran with a reputation for fair play. The referee shed his coat and announced to the crowd that the contest would be a gloved fight to the finish for a purse of \$1,000 under the London Prize Ring Rules, which meant rounds were untimed and lasted until one fighter hit the ground. Then each man had a thirty-second rest period and an additional eight seconds to meet in the center of the ring or forfeit the fight. Having heard the rumors of interference by Flood's supporters, Smith warned them it would be a perfectly square fight under his watch.

The two fighters pulled on leather skin-tight gloves, more to protect their hands than cushion their blows. Through the dim light, John L. noticed that the barge deck sloped away on each side of a crest that ran through the middle of the ring, which meant that both fighters would have to run up the rise to start each round. Sullivan might have considered it symbolic. As the son of working-class Irish-Catholic immigrants, he had been fighting uphill his whole life to earn his welcome in staid Brahmin Boston.

Smith called time at 10:40 p.m. Aware that the police or the crowd could end the fight at any moment, Sullivan uncoiled like a whip out of his corner and dashed up the slope of the barge. He met Flood at the peak, and the two burly sluggers rattled away at close quarters. Sullivan's arms fired like pistons as he pounded his opponent's face and stomach with rights and lefts. John L. drove Flood against the ropes and punctuated his two-minute fistic storm with a big bolt to his foe's stomach. Behind the lightning flash came the thunderclap as Flood crashed loudly to the deck. The fallen fighter rose and puffed away in his corner as he sat on the bent knee of his second, Dooney Harris. With the call of time, Sullivan charged from his corner and reached the summit first. The brawlers traded ninety seconds of fireworks in a "most unscientific manner" reported the *New York Herald*. Perspiration cascaded down the fighters' flush faces as they clenched and clawed like a pair of dogs. The second—and the third—ended with John L. throwing Flood to the deck.

Sullivan hammered his opponent's body like a punching bag as Flood's blows lost their bite. John L. felt in control and began to focus his glare outside the ring on the reigning heavyweight champion. Suddenly, panic swept over the barge as another tug approached. The fighters froze in fear. The police may have finally discovered them. But the vessel only carried more fans who wanted to watch

the nautical brawl. For the rest of the evening, the New York police remained in the dark, miles down the Hudson.

A groggy, but plucky Flood endured, but by the sixth round could barely see through his swollen eyes. He offered little resistance in the seventh, and as Flood's seconds carried him to his corner, his backers had seen enough. Their man couldn't win, but they could make sure he wouldn't lose. As soon as they pulled their knives, however, referee Smith bellowed, "If anyone breaks into this ring, I'll give the fight to this Boston man."

With the insurrection quelled, Flood wobbled out of his corner for the eighth round. He could barely lift his hands or head. Sullivan lined up his kill shot and unleashed his most powerful weapon—a vicious right to his opponent's jaw. The terrific wallop would have launched Flood into the Hudson had the ropes of the ring not been there. His seconds scraped the "Bull's Head Terror" off the deck and carried him to the corner. Flood couldn't continue.

Smith officially declared the unblemished Sullivan the victor. All eight rounds of the sixteen-minute mauling had ended with Flood sprawled on the deck of the barge. John L. walked to his opponent's corner, shook hands, and said, "We met as friends, and we part as friends." Sullivan then grabbed a hat, threw in a sawbuck, and circled the boat to collect ninety-eight dollars for the loser.

As he completed his charity work, the rising star who had streaked through the New York night spotted the champion again. His stare kindled, then deepened. John L. growled to Ryan, "I'll get you next!"