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“Good-Bye Boys, I Die a True American”: Homicide, Nativism, and Working-Class Culture in Antebellum New York City

Elliott J. Gorn

The Killing of Butcher Bill Poole

Stanwix Hall was crowded by nine o'clock on Saturday, February 24, 1855. The new Bowery saloon rang with the sounds of patrons singing, glasses clinking, and laborers laughing on that winter night, the end of the workweek. In the back room, bareknuckle boxing champion John Morrissey sat with friends, sharing toasts and songs. Their conviviality ended suddenly, however, when Morrissey, a gambling parlor owner and political gang leader as well as a prizefighter, realized that William Poole had entered the main barroom. The inebriated champion approached Poole, a powerfully built butcher and saloonkeeper. Salutations quickly gave way to insults, Morrissey calling Poole a cowardly son of a bitch, Poole retorting that Morrissey was a damned liar. The tension kept building, until the butcher pulled a gun and belted, “You tasted of my mutton before; how do you like it?” a reference to an earlier battle in which Poole, aided by several dozen friends, soundly thrashed the champion.¹

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¹ My version of the incident is a composite based on the voluminous, but often contradictory, evidence in the coroner's inquest and in the trial transcript of William Poole's killers. The former is “An Inquisition Taken at the House of William Poole,” March 23–April 9, 1855, box MDA 601, District Attorney's Indictment Papers (Municipal Archives, New York, N.Y.); it was reproduced with considerable faithfulness in the *New York Herald*, March 9–March 18, 1855; *New York Daily Tribune*, March 10–March 19, 1855; *New York Daily Times*, March 9–March 20, 1855; and in William Knapp, “*I Die a True American*”: *The True Life of William Poole* (New York, 1855), 21–80. See especially the testimony of Cyrus Shay, Cornelius Campbell, Lorenzo Deagle, John E. Dean, John Lyng, William Janeway, Francis McCabe, John Quinlan, John Rue, John Widely, W. H. Leeds, George Greene, and Samuel A. Suydam. An official transcript of the murder trial is not available from archival sources, but a very detailed reporter's transcript can be found: “The Stanwix Hall Tragedy: The Trial of Lewis Baker for the Homicide of William Poole,” *New York Daily Times*, Nov. 26–Dec. 13, 1855. See especially the testimony of Cyrenus Harris, Cyrus Shay, William M. Mitchell, Cornelius Campbell, Charles M. Vandervoort, Christopher Hogan, Wally Mason, James G. Bevins, John Lyng, Thomas Hyer, Thomas Burns, Charles Lozier, and Christian W. Schaffer.

Butcher Bill kept his gun pointed as the two goaded each other, exchanged slurs, and impugned one another's courage. A bystander, Mark Maguire, objected to Poole's anti-Irish remarks and announced that "an Irishman's as good as anyone, if he behaves himself." Poole offered to settle the matter with butcher knives, but Maguire declined the challenge, stating sheepishly that he would not fight because Butcher Bill had always been good to his brother. During this interruption, someone in the crowd passed a pistol to Morrissey. As friends moved in to separate the two men, Morrissey raised his gun over their heads and pulled the trigger. It misfired. At this critical moment, the police, summoned by the owners of Stanwix Hall, intervened. They took Poole to the Eighth Ward station house, held him briefly, then freed him on his pledge of peaceable conduct. Morrissey too was detained, then quickly released.²

Poole returned to Stanwix Hall and resumed his drinking; Morrissey stumbled in and out of saloons, ending up at Johnny Lyng's Sportsmen's Headquarters, where he discussed the evening's events with several friends. Around midnight, Dad Cunningham, a professional gambler, escorted Morrissey home, where the champion soon fell into a drunken sleep. But his companions at Lyng's place—Lewis Baker, James Turner, Patrick ("Paudeen") McLaughlin, John Hyler, James Irving, Cornelius Linn, and Charles Van Pelt—headed for Stanwix Hall. Though it was Sunday morning and New York City had a new ordinance against sabbath liquor sales, several men stood at the bar, including Poole, his brother-in-law Charles Lozier, and his friend Cyrus Shay.³

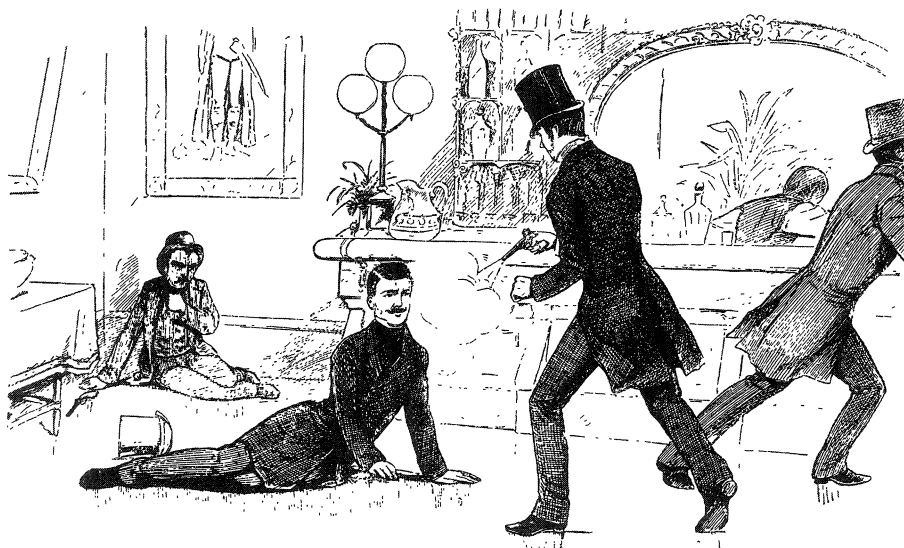
Precisely what happened next is unclear, but we can be reasonably sure of the following: Butcher Bill watched Morrissey's friends enter and offered Turner a drink. He refused. Insulted by the rebuff, Poole glared at the newcomers, provoking Paudeen McLaughlin to shout, "What are you staring at, you black muzzled son of a bitch." The butcher took one hundred dollars in gold from his pocket, proclaimed that he could whip any man in the room, and handed the money to the bartender to hold as a wager. However, he expressly excluded Paudeen from this offer, declaring, "You ain't worth it." Enraged, McLaughlin grabbed Poole by the collar and spat in his face. Before Butcher Bill could react, Turner pulled McLaughlin away and asked Poole to excuse his friend's drunken behavior.⁴

But just when things appeared to cool down, Turner threw off his cloak and drew an enormous revolver. Steadying the gun in the crook of his arm, he took aim, called for his friends to "sail in"—then accidentally shot himself in the elbow and fell writhing to the floor. Almost instantly, more pistols blazed. A bullet pierced Poole's

² See "Inquisition," box MDA 601, District Attorney's Indictment Papers; and "Stanwix Hall Tragedy," *New York Daily Times*, Nov. 26–Dec. 13, 1855. Friends of John Morrissey claimed that he aimed over Poole's head; enemies said he pointed his gun directly at Butcher Bill. The contradiction pervades the coroner's examination and the murder trial transcript.

³ *Ibid.* The meeting at Johnny Lyng's was crucial to the prosecution claim that Poole's murder was premeditated. Testimony indicated, however, that no one overheard the "conspirators'" conversation.

⁴ *Ibid.* That Poole failed to react to Paudeen's provocation was occasionally cited as a Christlike act, evidence that the assassins killed a blameless man.



The Murder of William Poole.

Reproduced from George Walling, *Recollections of a New York Chief of Police* (New York, 1890), 50.

leg as Baker, his gun drawn, came at the butcher. The two grappled briefly on the floor, but Baker quickly gained control and shot Poole in the chest at close range. Butcher Bill remained conscious for eleven days, recovered much of his strength, then died suddenly on March 8. The coroner removed Baker's bullet from Poole's heart.⁵

Drunken posturing, tragicomic ineptitude, sickening violence—a common bar-room brawl. Yet as many as a quarter of a million people jammed the streets of lower Manhattan to pay their last respects to the dead butcher. The *New York Times* reported that the crowd surpassed those that turned out for Andrew Jackson's or Daniel Webster's or Henry Clay's obsequies. On the morning of the funeral, a daguerreotype was taken of the body in its dying posture to freeze the sacred moment in time. Then the multitudes were given a few precious hours to file past the corpse as it lay in the Poole home on Christopher Street. At midafternoon the funeral

⁵ *Ibid.* In 1850, both Poole and Morrissey were twenty-one years old, the former was employed as a butcher and the latter as a bartender, and neither owned any assessable property. Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Manuscript Population Schedule, v. 41, New York City, ward 9, p. 447; *ibid.*, ward 1, p. 170. For popular, and often highly inaccurate, secondary accounts of the incident, see Charles Sutton, *The New York Toombs* (New York, 1874), ch. 9; William E. Howe and A. H. Hummel, *In Danger; or, Life in New York* (New York, 1888), 6–15; Herbert Asbury, *The Gangs of New York* (New York, 1928), ch. 5; Alvin F. Harlow, *Old Bowery Days: The Chronicles of a Famous Street* (New York, 1931), ch. 16; and John Lardner, "That Was New York: The Martyrdom of Bill the Butcher," *New Yorker*, March 20, 1954, pp. 41–57, and *ibid.*, March 27, 1954, pp. 38–59. Contemporary New York newspapers were filled with stories about the incident during the subsequent month. See especially the *New York Daily Times*, *New York Daily Tribune*, *New York Herald*, and *New York Journal of Commerce*.

procession began. Six thousand mourners—including a grand marshal, a fifty-two-piece band, local politicians, members of fraternal organizations, volunteer firemen, militia companies, and delegations from the instantly formed “Poole Associations” of New York, Baltimore, and Philadelphia—marched in the parade with the butcher’s widow and orphan. The day’s pageantry stirred New Yorkers deeply, as the solemn two-mile-long procession, ending with the flag-draped coffin and eight score carriages filled with grief-stricken family and friends, wound its way down Broadway, the Bowery, and Bleeker Street. Getting through the crowd to Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn took the cortege nearly six hours.⁶

The size of Poole’s funeral is but one measure of the depth of feeling plumbed by the Stanwix Hall affair. Two days after the shooting, the *New York Herald* declared, “The greatest excitement prevailed throughout the city on the subject of the late fearful encounter among the pugilists in Broadway. Indeed, it was almost the sole topic of conversation, and every account of the affray was read with great avidity.” Two weeks later, the *New York Tribune* continued to echo the *Herald*’s words: “The greatest excitement still prevails in the City, in relation to the murder of Poole and the escape of Baker; in fact, it seems to be about the only topic of conversation in every circle, wherever you may go.” Cries for justice, amplified by newspaper reports of Baker’s escape aboard a brig bound for the Canary Islands, swelled so loud that city officials chartered a clipper ship, hired a crew, and sent several policemen to the coast of North Africa to apprehend the fugitive. When the “conspirators” finally stood trial nine months after the incident, the courtroom was packed with spectators, including the governor of New York State and the mayor of New York City.⁷

A nerve had been touched. Poole’s murder opened old wounds, allowing ancient ethnic hatreds to ooze with renewed ugliness. Less obviously but perhaps more profoundly, Butcher Bill’s demise traced new lesions of class and gender that gaped wide by midcentury. The Stanwix Hall affair takes us deep into antebellum New York City, giving us insight into popular nativism, working-class culture, and urban street life.

“The Champion of American Principles”

How do we account for the emotion unleashed by the killing of Butcher Bill? It is easy to associate the murder with the wave of nativist sentiment then cresting in

⁶ For descriptions of the funeral, see *The Life of William Poole, With a Full Account of the Terrible Affray in Which He Received His Death Wound* (New York, 1855), 14–21; *New York Herald*, March 12, 1855; *New York Daily Tribune*, March 12, 1855; *New York Daily Times*, March 12, 1855; and *New York Morning Express*, March 12, 1855. No doubt, some of those lining the streets were simply curious, and others were attracted by the spectacle on a fine day at the end of a hard winter. Still, the numbers were unprecedented, and idle curiosity alone cannot explain the phenomenon.

⁷ On the pursuit of Baker, see *New York Herald*, March 13–March 18, 1855; *New York Daily Tribune*, March 14–March 18, 1855; *New York Daily Times*, March 10–March 19, 1855; *New York Morning Express*, March 13, 1855. On the crowds at the murder trial, see “Stanwix Hall Tragedy,” *New York Daily Times*, Nov. 26, 1855. For the quotations, see *New York Herald*, Feb. 27, 1855; and *New York Tribune*, March 15, 1855.

New York City. True, Poole's sordid past blemished his credentials for apotheosis in the republic of virtue. He gambled extravagantly, frequented bars and brothels, led a gang of toughs who terrorized voters on primary and election days, and revealed a streak of brutality in several vicious brawls. A mere month before the shooting, newspapers reported that the police charged him with violating New York's ban on sabbath liquor sales in his Bank Exchange Saloon. But Poole made amends. It was said that from his deathbed he urged his companions to change their ways. He reportedly prayed for his assailants and declared, "I forgive them and have to believe that I am forgiven." Surely countless native-born citizens were moved when they read his last mortal words, "Good-bye boys, I die a true American." Poole, concluded one observer, "had the spirit and the soul of a patriot—selfishness formed no part of his composition, and his heart was large enough for himself, his friends, and his country too."⁸

Anti-immigrant presses rolled overtime rehabilitating the butcher's reputation. An industrious tradesman, Poole was said to have gained his large clientele by good character and probity. Butcher Bill shared his prosperity with the poor, giving away food and coal to those in need. He even wrote patriotic poetry, published posthumously, that defended American rights and taught foreigners their place:

Here let them have the blessings of our law,
Let Justice shield them and let Justice awe,
But let them not presume beyond to go,
And teach *Americans* what they should know;
Let not our country in their hands be given,
And thus betray the trust received from Heaven.

For months after his death, in melodramas performed on theater stages across the country, actors literally wrapped themselves in the flag and brought down the house repeating those words, "Good-bye boys, I die a true American." Indeed, it was through the good-versus-evil, virtue-against-corruption conventions of melodrama—a remarkably popular form of antebellum entertainment, especially among working-class men and women—that many Americans comprehended Butcher Bill's demise.⁹

If Poole was an unlikely hero, social circumstances predisposed individuals to find martyrs. The massive demographic shifts New York City underwent during the ante-

⁸ On Poole's brutal character, see "Inquisition," box MDA 601, District Attorney's Indictment Papers; and "Stanwix Hall Tragedy," *New York Daily Times*, Nov. 26–Dec. 13, 1855. See also *Irish American*, March 17, 1855; *New York Herald*, March 12, 1855; *New York Daily Tribune*, March 10, 1855; *New York Daily Times*, March 9, March 12, March 19, 1855. For the quotation, see *Life of Poole*, 7. Whether Poole actually made his final declaration is uncertain. According to Charles Haswell, Butcher Bill's parting words were "Good-bye boys, I'm a gonet." Charles Haswell, *Reminiscences of an Octogenarian* (New York, 1896), 498.

⁹ *Life of Poole*, 8; Harlow, *Old Bowery Days*, 297. On melodrama, see David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture, 1800–1850* (Chicago, 1968). On the social background of the theater, see Peter George Buckley, "To the Opera House: Culture and Society in New York City, 1820–1860" (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York, Stony Brook, 1984).

bellum era give us some context for understanding the Poole affair and the nativist upsurge. In 1800, the city's population stood at roughly sixty thousand people; in just half a century, it increased tenfold. Before 1830, migrants from the rural hinterlands and Protestants from England fueled this growth. But during the middle third of the century, new immigrants, especially the Irish, poured in, so that by the 1850s over half of all residents had been born abroad, and in wards like the fourth and sixth in lower Manhattan, nearly three-quarters were of foreign extraction. The trend so accelerated that during the decade before Butcher Bill's death, New York's total population rose 70 percent, while its foreign-born residency increased at twice that rate.¹⁰

Impoverishment pushed many off the land, while jobs pulled them toward the burgeoning cities. By midcentury, New York was the nation's largest manufacturing center, with both large factories and small shops. But as the industrial capitalist economy developed—as specialization of labor made workers of artisans—standards of living often fell. Many, perhaps most, working-class families in New York City found their incomes declining during the 1840s. The next decade, too proved a roller coaster for labor, with several periods of rising inflation and high unemployment. Shortly after midcentury, the *New York Times* estimated a minimum yearly budget for a family of four to be six hundred dollars, yet the average working person earned roughly half that figure. Shoemakers received five dollars per week, while unskilled laborers made a dollar a day and could expect to work only about two hundred days each year. Printers always had been among the best-paid artisans, yet their union claimed that three out of five men earned inadequate wages in 1850, and that only one in twenty would ever own his own shop. Perhaps most important, with so many journeymen now facing lives as wage laborers in glutted markets, lack of job security and glaring inequalities of wealth and power became permanent conditions.¹¹

These long-term social and economic problems grew especially acute just prior to the Stanwix Hall incident. A severe downturn in the economy caused New York City to increase its spending on the almshouse department by 240 percent between 1853 and 1856, making it the fastest growing item in the municipal budget. As the wealthy few ostentatiously displayed their fortunes, growing numbers of workers went on strike in an effort to keep up with rising prices. The crisis intensified in the months immediately preceding Poole's murder, when a sudden wave of bankruptcies in mercantile, industrial, and financial firms washed over the economy. Cold weather always brought hard economic times to New York as ports froze, construction slowed, and businesses closed down. During the winter of the Stanwix Hall

¹⁰ Edward K. Spann, *The New Metropolis: New York City, 1840–1857* (New York, 1981), 23–28; Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (New York, 1984), 108–10; Amy Bridges, *A City in the Republic: Antebellum New York and the Origins of Machine Politics* (Cambridge, Eng., 1984), 39–45; Allan Stanley Horlick, *Country Boys and Merchant Princes: The Social Control of Young Men in New York* (Lewisburg, 1975), 25–44.

¹¹ Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 108–34, 363–64; Spann, *New Metropolis*, 67–91, 306–12; Bridges, *City in the Republic*, 45–58.

affair, inflated food prices and unemployment drove an unprecedented sixty thousand residents to apply for aid from the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor. Newspapers noted that countless unemployed men with hunger in their eyes now loitered on street corners. Others who still had jobs were forced to take cuts in wages and piece rates, even though the price of necessities remained high. Most frightening to the middle and upper classes, a series of mass meetings brought out tens of thousands of workers demanding bread, jobs, and justice. To top off months of hard times, a crippling snowstorm followed by a severe cold wave hit the city in February, resulting in still more layoffs. Butcher Bill's murder and burial, then, occurred as fear and frustration stalked the streets.¹²

There was plenty of hardship for all, but immiserization struck immigrants hardest. In the year of Poole's death, 60 percent of the Irish-born work force toiled as domestics, day laborers, porters, laundresses, or coachmen, all poorly paid jobs made doubly precarious by hard times. At the height of the potato famine, the Irish made up 30 percent of New York's population, but they accounted for 50 percent of all arrests, 60 percent of the almshouse population, and 70 percent of charity recipients. The Irish were also hit hardest by those diseases—engendered by overcrowding, poor diet, and lack of sanitation—that took the lives of nearly half of all New York children before age six and that caused overall mortality rates to rise from one in forty in 1840 to one in twenty-seven in 1855. Because of the jobs they occupied, Irishmen experienced work-related fatalities in staggering numbers. But the Irish merely got a larger dose of what all working-class people were forced to take. With aggregate deaths approaching, perhaps exceeding, births in the mid-1850s, New York City held plenty of misery for everyone.¹³

Poverty, overcrowding, and disease; ethnic, religious, and class conflict; debasement of labor skills, ever-increasing competition for jobs and political power, and a wildly gyrating business cycle—all kept New Yorkers, especially working-class New Yorkers, tense in the 1850s. Such crises generated a new surge of nativist activity during the months before Poole received his death wound. In the face of fragmentation—economic and political, social and cultural—many turned to a strident assertion of national identity. The Order of the Star Spangled Banner, founded in 1853, offered its members a sense of solidarity that came from secret meetings, signs, and rituals. By 1854, the American or Know-Nothing movement had evolved into a powerful political party whose candidates supported a twenty-one-year naturalization period for immigrants, Bible reading in public schools, deportation of foreign paupers and criminals, and elimination of Catholics from government office. Know-Nothingism promised a return to the early republican virtues of hard work, piety, and mutuality, all supposedly mocked by loose-moraled foreigners. The American

¹² Spann, *New Metropolis*, 81, 89, 307–12; Bridges, *City in the Republic*, 116.

¹³ Spann, *New Metropolis*, 134–38; Joshua Brown, "The 'Dead-Rabbits'—Bowery Boys Riot: An Analysis of the Antebellum New York Gang" (M.A. thesis, Columbia University, 1976), 113, 117.

party styled itself a sentinel of liberty against the aggrandizing power of the Roman Catholic church, a guardian of freedom against Old World enslavement.¹⁴

The accounts of Poole's murder brought these themes together, most poignantly expressing the Know-Nothings' sense of victimization, their feelings of powerlessness before social changes they neither desired nor understood. A "champion of American principles, battling for freedom's cause," Poole was "set upon and hunted by a gang of outlaws." Butcher Bill's killers stalked him with muffled footsteps and hushed voices, but "he bore all meekly as the martyr at the stake, and at last he fell, overborne by numbers, crushed by a superior force." Poole was marked for death because of his outspoken patriotism, his support of the Know-Nothing party, and his effectiveness as an organizer of other "shoulder hitters," political musclemen who opposed Tammany Hall's election thugs.¹⁵

The *New York Times* declared flatly, "a gang of ruffians had laid a distinct and premeditated plot to murder him. Half a dozen of them, armed with revolvers, assailed him when almost alone and wholly unarmed—and failing to provoke him, by the utmost insolence they could use towards him, shot him in cold blood." An extraordinarily popular pamphlet entitled *The Life of William Poole* asserted again and again that the murder was not just a barroom incident, but part of a "plot," an organized "conspiracy," an "assassination" by the "Irish party," which now menaced all native citizens with the same fate. America's generous laws and tolerant press had only encouraged the "hidden passions of a brutal race." Cunning priests and ambitious politicians, who longed to destroy the hard-won fruits of republican liberty, manipulated the ignorant Irish masses. Unlike a foreign army, however, this enemy was almost invisible, and therefore doubly dangerous: "Now the invading hosts are pouring in with hatred in their hearts . . . building up a separate system, and establishing a separate armed power in our midst." Poole's murder proved that a fifth column of Irish threatened to subvert American democratic institutions and thereby to destroy freedom itself.¹⁶

¹⁴ Spann, *New Metropolis*, 306–12, 336–39, 401–27; Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 315–25; Bridges, *City in the Republic*, 90–98; Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800–1860: A Study in the Origins of Nativism* (New York, 1938), 380–436; Ira M. Leonard and Robert D. Parmet, *American Nativism, 1830–1860* (New York, 1971), 85–97. The "ethnocultural" school of political historians has stressed religious and ethnic conflict as the basis for American voting patterns and party formation, particularly in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. For examples, see Michael F. Holt, "The Politics of Impatience: The Origins of Know Nothingism," *Journal of American History*, 60 (Sept. 1973), 309–31; Michael F. Holt, *Forging a Majority: The Formation of the Republican Party in Pittsburgh, 1848–1860* (New Haven, 1969); Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850's* (New York, 1978); Paul Kleppner, *The Cross of Culture: A Social Analysis of Midwestern Politics, 1850–1900* (New York, 1970); Paul Kleppner, *The Third Electoral System, 1853–1892: Parties, Voters, and Political Cultures* (Chapel Hill, 1979); Ronald P. Formisano, *The Birth of Mass Political Parties: Michigan, 1827–1861* (Princeton, 1971); William E. Gienapp, "Nativism and the Creation of a Republican Majority in the North Before the Civil War," *Journal of American History*, 72 (Dec. 1985), 529–59; Joel H. Silbey, "The Surge of Republican Power: Partisan Antipathy, American Social Conflict, and the Coming of the Civil War," in *Essays on American Antebellum Politics, 1840–1860*, ed. Stephen E. Maizlish and John J. Kushma (College Station, 1982), 199–229; Stephen E. Maizlish, "The Meaning of Nativism and the Crisis of the Union: The Know-Nothing Movement in the Antebellum North," *ibid.*, 166–98.

¹⁵ Knapp, "I Die a True American," 9, 11; *Life of Poole*, 64–67.

¹⁶ Knapp, "I Die a True American," 9, 11; *Life of Poole*, 64–67; *New York Morning Express*, March 9, 1855; *New York Daily Times*, March 12, 1855.

The fact that Poole had been a fighting man and a companion of the great champions of the prize ring heightened the sense of betrayal. For decades proponents of boxing had argued that the ring upheld the values of fair play and equal opportunity. Poole's murder belied the claims of equitable fighting and, by extension, the claims of even-handed competition between ethnic groups. Just as Butcher Bill allegedly offered a fair fight only to be treacherously assassinated, many Americans believed that their nation had been stabbed in the back as it opened its arms to foreigners. Concluded the *New York Express*, the scoundrels who beset this quiet, unoffending, unresisting man would not hesitate to cut anyone's throat for the sake of profit.¹⁷

Indeed, in a poem by Americus, the metaphors of betrayal took on overtones of serpentine evil destroying Edenic innocence:

The ball that pierced a freeman's heart
 Hath stilled the life-blood's flow,
 With hidden serpent's deadly art,
 It brought a freeman low.
 By foreign bravo's hired band
 The murderous shaft was cast,
 The Champion of his native land,
 A Martyr fell at last.

More than a mere homicide, the killing of Butcher Bill was an assassination attempt on the Republic itself, according to Americus:

A ball hath struck the nation's heart
 And deep within its core,
 All silently with poisonous art
 It feeds a rankling sore.
 O, land of Washington! awake!
 Start from your fatal rest,
 Unite, the viper's power to break,
 And tear it from your breast.

The legacy that George Washington had bequeathed to all freemen now stood jeopardized by a sinister, artful, cowardly foe, by evil as pure and cunning as the primordial snake who brought sin on all the generations of humankind.¹⁸

The Reverend George S. Hare of the Methodist Episcopal church also preached this theme of betrayal, testifying that Butcher Bill "fell like a martyr, fell by foreign hands to gratify foreign vengeance." Hare acknowledged that Poole had besmirched

¹⁷ See Elliott J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca, 1986), 34-128; *New York Morning Express*, March 9, 1855; *Life of Poole*, 12.

¹⁸ Americus, "Lines Dedicated to the Officers and Members of the Poole Association," in *Life of Poole*, 22. An 1855 tract, *The Know Nothing Platform: Containing an Account of the Encroachments of the Roman Catholic Hierarchy*, used the same metaphor of the serpent in the garden. See Maizlish, "Meaning of Nativism," 166. The viper motif also appeared in Knapp, "I Die a True American," 12.

himself with shady dealings in the past, and that he associated with some unsavory characters. But the foreign threat overrode all. Tens of thousands of mourners expressed by their presence an "honest indignation against a brutal, blood-thirsty spirit of hostility to Americans born on American soil." Newspapers concurred. The *New York Express* argued that mourners honored, not Poole the street brawler, but Poole the patriot, that Butcher Bill was murdered simply for being an outspoken champion of his country. The editor of the *New York Crusader* went even further, referring to the "gang of foreign midnight marauders who live on blood and plunder." "Irish assassins," the newspaper warned, now had a "black list" that targeted for death all "men whose hearts are silent and burning sanctuaries of Americanism—whose influence is a mighty power against foreign aggression."¹⁹

No doubt some of this rhetoric was part of an overheated political process. After all, the American party did very well with such language, electing countless local officials in 1854 and coming very close to installing its own mayor of New York. Political nativism, which had waxed and waned for decades, grew so powerful by the 1850s that it splintered the old two-party system, and the Know-Nothings temporarily overtook the Whigs. Nativist politics succeeded by holding divergent social groups together through anti-immigrant symbolism; appeals to ethnic hatreds allowed men whose livelihoods depended on winning elections to sidestep the more complex and politically dangerous divisions of class. Ideologies and cultural agendas that once had been loosely related now seemed solidly united: Evangelicals reasserted public morality and piety in opposition to priest-ridden, besotted Catholics; bourgeois citizens upheld hard work and sober self-control against the immigrants' slothful ways; artisan republicans sought to maintain a spirit of virtuous mutual improvement in craft and culture that contrasted with the aliens' debasement; wage earners demanded protection against foreigners who took their jobs; diverse American men found confirmation of their own masculinity through red-blooded patriotic posturing. All were joined by inflammatory political rhetoric that whipped up hatred against the despoilers of an idyllic way of life.²⁰

While immigrant baiting was a venerable political tradition, the metaphors of invasion, betrayal, and contamination were far from totally irrational. Rather, they gave expression to genuine fears rooted in real social experience. The sense of powerlessness that cut so many native-born Americans stung even more sharply when they pondered the strength of the foreigners in their midst. Through disciplined organization, the Irish had indeed acquired significant political influence. They constituted over a third of the electorate in 1855, and Mayor Fernando Wood owed his

¹⁹ *New York Daily Times*, March 19, 1855; *New York Morning Express*, March 12, 1855; *ibid.*, March 13, 1855; *New York Crusader*, quoted in *Life of Poole*, 62.

²⁰ Bridges, *City in the Republic*, 93–102; Holt, "Politics of Impatience," 329–31. David Montgomery has argued that nativist politics united Protestant Americans across the owner/worker chasm, thus blunting laborers' class consciousness, a thesis often repeated in recent labor histories. See David Montgomery, "The Shuttle and the Cross: Weavers and Artisans in the Kensington Riots of 1844," *Journal of Social History*, 5 (Summer 1972), esp. 428–31. The literature on republicanism is voluminous, but for a particularly useful examination of the concept in the pre-Civil War era, see Jean Baker, "From Belief into Culture: Republicanism in the Antebellum North," *American Quarterly*, 37 (Fall 1985), 532–50.

election to them. With about half of all voters naturalized citizens, only two New York City wards were completely secure for native candidates by the midfifties, while nine were carried regularly by the foreign bloc, and five others often voted as ethnic bastions. For the Irish, politics was an outlet for ambition, a source of jobs, a shield against overbearing laws and judges, and a repository of group esteem. But this measure of power made the Irish an even more inviting target. Waste and fraud, reformers believed, had supplanted virtuous, self-restrained government. Worse, immigrants defiled not only politics, but all of community life. Many native citizens now saw slums where handsome neighborhoods used to be, and they blamed the Irish rather than the social forces that were transforming the lives of a whole generation. Prostitution, violent crime, pauperism, drinking, gambling, and immoral amusements seemed on the rise and more open than ever before. In such an environment, how could bedrock republican virtues survive?²¹

While political nativism appealed to divergent social groups, the murder of Bill Poole held special poignancy for many in the middling and working classes, particularly those practicing old traditional trades. The fate of labor was their main concern, and Poole's death gave it expression. The *Albany Daily State Register* described the crowds at Butcher Bill's funeral as industrious mechanics, laborers, and shopkeepers; the *New York Times* said they were not rowdies but respectable people; the *New York Sunday Courier* declared them quiet and well dressed; and the *New York Express* called the crowds "well-behaved, . . . scrupulously decorous, nay, indeed, a very solemn, sober outpouring of the masses."²²

No doubt the mourners were more mixed in character, but the accounts must be interpreted metaphorically. Poole, it was said in a memorial resolution sent by citizens of the Ninth Ward to his widow, was a "constant friend of labor." His martyrdom offered a paradigm for that of American working men: "They have witnessed the giving away of their lands to those who hate them," wrote the anonymous author of *The Life of William Poole*. "They have witnessed the distress caused by the competition of foreigners in every department of industry. . . . They have known, many of them, that American girls, perchance their own sisters, have been driven to lives of infamy by this ruthless competition—they have known this many a gloomy day, that wages have been falling gradually in consequence of this generous sharing of work, in the American labor market, with men who are willing to work for fifty cents per day." Indeed, Poole's own trade had long been a bastion for the native born, but starting in the 1840s, Tammany politicians began selling licenses to Irish butchers, causing acute competition.²³

If this were not enough, Poole's assassin, Welsh-born Lewis Baker, had been em-

²¹ Brown, "Dead Rabbits"—Bowery Boys Riot," 78–79; Spann, *New Metropolis*, 248–56, 315, 334–39, 344–50; Bridges, *City in the Republic*, 39–45, 83–102; Robert Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City, 1825–1863* (New York, 1949), 150–71.

²² *New York Morning Express*, March 12, 1855; *New York Daily Times*, March 12, 1855; *New York Courier* and *Albany Daily State Register*, quoted in *Life of Poole*, 61–63.

²³ *Life of Poole*, 15, 65.

ployed as a New York policeman on the emigrant squad. The point was not lost on the author of *The Life of William Poole*, who complained of the “city guardians of foreign birth who are holding office to the exclusion of many well-deserving American mechanics, who are out of employment and suffering from the effects of ‘Hard Times’ as well as that unnatural policy which confers honor and pay upon the hunters-down of Americans for their love of country, and lets the hunted ones starve.” Similarly, William Knapp’s “*I Die a True American*” declared Poole was murdered because he believed that Americans deserved more than “the crumbs that dropped from an alien’s table,” because he insisted that the native born have an equal chance for employment. Again, there was truth behind the hate-filled language. A special committee of the state legislature found that out of 246 policemen appointed in 1855, 143 had Irish surnames. Moreover, the coroner’s inquest charged Daniel Linn, one of Baker’s brother officers, as an accessory to Poole’s murder and also accused city councilman James Kerrigan of aiding the killer in his escape.²⁴

With the Democrats openly currying immigrant votes and the old Whig party moribund, the Know-Nothing movement played skillfully on the frustrations of native-born laborers. But the issue went beyond the political favoritism of Mayor Wood, who gave work to foreigners as paybacks for their support. What was most important was the underlying perception that immigrants not only took natives’ jobs, but that, desperate for work, they also depressed wages, facilitated the debase-ment of craft skills, and encouraged the growth of sweated labor. Political nativism gave voice to the anger of many artisans, mechanics, and workers who felt taken for granted by the regular parties at the very time when their trades were being transformed—or destroyed—by the same maturing capitalist economy that concentrated wealth and power in fewer hands.²⁵

By the 1850s, an increasingly specialized labor market had absorbed apprentices and journeymen, eroded their autonomy, obviated their traditional skills, forced them into dependency on propertied men, and left them chronically underem-

²⁴ *Life of Poole*, 53–59; Knapp, “*I Die a True American*,” 8; *New York Herald*, March 18, 1855. Baker escaped “through the connivance and aid of members of the police department,” according to *New York Daily Times*, March 12, 1855. For the contrasting view that the Poole affair was a ploy gotten up to seize control of the police force, and thereby of city government, see “A citizen of New York” to editor, *New York Tribune*, March 17, 1855. See also Brown, “‘Dead Rabbits’—Bowery Boys Riot,” 11–12; Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City*, 163–64; *New York Daily Times*, March 12, 1855; *New York Daily Tribune*, March 1, 1855; *New York Morning Express*, March 9, 1855. On the police and politics, see James F. Richardson, “Mayor Fernando Wood and the New York Police Force, 1855–1857,” *New-York Historical Society Quarterly*, 50 (Jan. 1966), 5–19; and Paul O. Weinbaum, “Temperance, Politics, and the New York City Riots of 1857,” *ibid.*, 59 (July 1975), 246–51.

²⁵ The transformation of labor and its cultural implications in the nineteenth century has now received considerable scholarly attention. In addition to the path-breaking work of Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, esp. 315–25, see, for example, Bridges, *City in the Republic*, 39–60; Horlick, *Country Boys and Merchant Princes*, 25–64; Paul G. Faler, *Mechanics and Manufacturers in the Early Industrial Revolution: Lynn, Massachusetts, 1780–1860* (Albany, 1981), 109–38; Bruce Laurie, “‘Nothing on Compulsion’: Life Styles of Philadelphia Artisans, 1820–1850,” *Labor History*, 15 (Summer 1974), 337–66; Susan Hirsch, *Roots of the American Working Class* (Philadelphia, 1978), ch. 1, 2, 5; Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815–1919* (New York, 1977); Joseph F. Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present* (New York, 1977), 144–172; Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeepers’ Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837* (New York, 1978), 37–61; and Richard Briggs Stott, “The Worker in the Metropolis: New York City, 1820–1860” (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1983).

ployed. Capitalist social relationships destroyed a way of life that placed mutuality, community welfare, craft traditions, and independence ahead of simple profits. While mass markets debased skills and gutted old trades, a new bourgeois ideology extolled productivity and moneymaking at the expense of republican values. As labor historians point out, workers reacted in a variety of ways—some radical, some conservative. Nativism was one response. Immigrants themselves, rather than the economic system that undercut skills and wages, were often blamed for the workers' troubles. The Irish depressed wages; the Irish displaced American job seekers; the Irish forced all others to live on a pittance.²⁶

Butcher Bill's downfall, it was said, paralleled that of native-born workers, for just as he had sought fair competition only to be gunned down, Americans had been victimized by aggressive, alien hordes, by men who refused to play by the rules. To those rendered powerless, it made sense to blame an alleged foreign conspiracy and to fight back with clandestine organizations. The Know-Nothing movement offered action, however misguided, in the face of crisis. Equally important, nativism had explanatory power. Taken together, the rituals and ceremonies surrounding Butcher Bill's funeral were a parable, an exemplum, a text that allowed men to grasp the elusive meanings of very real and painful social changes. As drama—as melodrama—Poole's martyrdom played out the conflicts working people experienced and named their nameless fears.²⁷

"The Schools of Vice Are Open"

While most Americans in 1855 probably accepted the natives-versus-foreigners explanation of the Stanwix Hall affair, reality was not so simple. Ethnic turmoil helps explain Poole's murder and its aftermath, but to dwell exclusively on such tensions is to miss crucial crosscutting tendencies. True, throughout the antebellum era ethnicity was a key organizing principle of the American electorate. Simply because politics took on an ethnocultural cast, however, does not mean that class was secondary or unimportant. Ethnic politics inflamed hatreds, even blinded Americans to other social divisions, but never obliterated class-based distinctions of power and cultural style. Rather, the two categories—ethnic politics and class politics—shaped and modified each other. During recessions, for example, labor organizations suffered severe attrition, while nativist groups—with their ideology of prosperity flowing to all who practiced the virtues of temperance, thrift, piety, and industriousness—attracted many working-class converts. The allegedly loose morals and sloppy

²⁶ See especially Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*; Bridges, *City in the Republic*; Falter, *Mechanics and Manufacturers*; Laurie, "Nothing on Compulsion."

²⁷ On the Know-Nothing party, see Spann, *New Metropolis*, 334–39, 93–98; Leonard and Parmet, *American Nativism*, 85–105; Billington, *Protestant Crusade*, 380–436; Holt, "Politics of Impatience," 309–31; Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City*, 162–71; Bridges, *City in the Republic*, 90–98; Gienapp, "Nativism," 529–37; Maizlish, "Meaning of Nativism," 166–98; and Kleppner, *Third Electoral System*, 48–142. On conspiracy theories and mass movements in the antebellum era, see David Brion Davis, "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic and Anti-Mormon Literature," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 47 (Sept. 1960), 205–24.

habits of foreigners made them convenient symbols of the behavior to avoid if one would succeed in a capitalist marketplace. But many, perhaps most, working-class people, whether native or foreign born, never unequivocally accepted bourgeois assumptions. Despite their ethnic enmities, many of these individuals shared a way of life, one deeply offensive to the guardians of morality.²⁸

In that context, William Poole's martyrdom to the American cause appears supremely ironic. Nativist rhetoric often dwelled on themes of idyllic republicanism, patriotic self-sacrifice, and evangelical piety. While Know-Nothingism's explanatory power came from images of innocence violated, of virtue betrayed, Butcher Bill and his companions were far from innocent or virtuous. When we examine the evidence in the Poole affair, it becomes apparent that the murder is most accurately understood not as a conspiracy, but as the product of an all-male subculture, deeply divided along ethnic lines, yet embracing diverse individuals with a shared set of values, behaviors, and ways of interacting. Indeed, as the *Freeman's Journal and Catholic Register* pointed out, those accused of plotting Poole's murder were not all foreigners, but a mixed group of immigrants and native-born Americans. Like the Know-Nothing movement that canonized Poole, this urban underground culture arose from the forces transforming American cities. Street life encompassed countless men who either chose, or were forced, to live on the margins of mainstream society, as the trial of Poole's murderer, Lewis Baker, made clear.²⁹

Poole was no sacrificial lamb. According to eyewitness testimony, he carried a gun on the night of the shooting, and subsequent investigation revealed that his overcoat had three burnt holes in one pocket, indicating that he probably returned his enemies' fire. Further, Butcher Bill's friend Cyrus Shay admitted to discharging four shots at the conspirators. Baker took bullets in the head and abdomen, and Poole's brother-in-law, Charles Lozier, also suffered a head wound. Thus, a total of four men were shot during the affray, two on each side. Not only was there return fire from Poole and his friends, it was plausibly argued by Baker's attorneys that the "assassins" were unaware that Poole was in Stanwix Hall, that Turner attempted to keep Paudeen off Poole until he saw the butcher's gun, that Baker fired only as three men—Poole, Shay, and Lozier—attacked him, and that the other "conspirators"

²⁸ The "ethnocultural" school stresses religious and ethnic conflict as the basis of political alignment; Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*; Bridges, *City in the Republic*; Stott, "Worker in the Metropolis"; and Buckley, "To the Opera House," put more emphasis on social class and ideology. Historians have just begun to sketch the outlines of the class-based "bachelor subculture" in antebellum cities. In addition to Stott, "Worker in the Metropolis," and Buckley, "To the Opera House," see Gorn, *Manly Art*, 129–47; Melvin F. Adelman, *A Sporting Time: New York City and the Rise of Modern Athletics, 1820–1870* (Urbana, 1986); and especially Leonard Harry Ellis, "Men among Men: An Exploration of All Male Relationships in Victorian America" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1982).

²⁹ *Freeman's Journal and Catholic Register*, March 24, 1855; *Irish American*, March 17, 1855. For the best study of New York City street life, see Buckley, "To the Opera House." On masculine roles, see Peter Stearns, *Be a Man! Males in Modern Society* (New York, 1979), 79–112; Edward Anthony Rotundo, "Body and Soul: Changing Ideals of American Middle-Class Manhood," *Journal of Social History*, 16 (Summer 1983), 23–38; Edward Anthony Rotundo, "Manhood in America: The Northern Middle Class, 1770–1920" (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 1982); Charles E. Rosenberg, "Sexuality, Class, and Role in Nineteenth Century America," in *The American Man*, ed. Joseph Pleck and Elizabeth Pleck (Englewood Cliffs, 1980), 219–54; Joseph Pleck and Elizabeth Pleck, "Introduction," *ibid.*, 14–15; Ned Polsky, *Hustlers, Beats, and Others* (Chicago, 1967), 31–37, 72–73, 85–115; and Ellis, "Men among Men," esp. ch. 1–3.

were unarmed and ran for cover as soon as the shooting began. Interpreted this way, Poole's killing was no assassination, but a fight that got out of hand. Despite an incredibly biased charge to the jury by Judge Cornelius Roosevelt—grandfather of the future Republican president—which simply accepted prosecution allegations at face value, the jurors, merchants and shopkeepers all, failed to reach a verdict. Twice more the case was tried, and twice more juries could not decide.³⁰

Poole's street reputation as deceitful, bloodthirsty, and unscrupulous became evident during the court proceedings. When Baker fired his pistol, he did so believing that eventually he must kill Poole or be killed. The two men had been drinking and gambling companions a few years before, but an incident in which Poole was paid to beat up two friends of Baker's—one was a consumptive, the other was sleeping when Butcher Bill attacked him—embittered their relationship. Before long Poole publicly threatened Baker, who began carrying a gun to protect himself. One day, the butcher and a second man jumped Baker, tore his mouth and gouged at his eyes; during another chance meeting, Poole threatened to cut off Baker's ears and nose and to make his head into a pot of soup; at a public gathering months later, Poole flashed a gun and boasted that if he saw his enemy, one of them would die. At Baker's trial, saloon owner Johnny Lyng concluded that Butcher Bill thought nothing of fixing a horse race, selling out a friend, or raising a gang to beat up an enemy. In Lyng's view Poole failed to respect the sporting fraternity's unwritten code of honor: loyalty to peers, honest wagering, and fair combat.³¹

If Poole overstepped the bounds of sporting conduct, he was merely a particularly violent man in a violent subculture. All of the participants in the Stanwix Hall affair had bloodstained hands. Trial testimony indicated that Baker was determined to gain revenge for the slights and assaults he suffered from Butcher Bill. Indeed, a few months preceding Poole's demise, Baker and James Turner got into a saloon gunfight with Poole's close friend, Tom Hyer, a former American prize-ring champion. In another incident, Hyer—who had served time on Blackwell's Island for assault—allegedly held Paudeen McLaughlin down while an accomplice bit off his nose. During the two months before they met in Stanwix Hall, threats and challenges passed between Paudeen and Butcher Bill, and the streets were alive with rumors of their festering rivalry. A bartender who refused to serve drinks after hours to Hyer and Poole had his hair grabbed by the former and his face mutilated by the latter. In their battle before the Stanwix Hall incident, Poole scratched, bit, and gouged Morrissey's face, while others stomped his body. Even as Poole lay dying, a case was pending against him for assault with intent to kill. Similarly, Morrissey

³⁰ The best evidence is in the trial transcript, "Stanwix Hall Tragedy," *New York Daily Times*, Nov. 26–Dec. 15, 1855, esp. the testimony of Campbell, Vandervoort, Hogan, Mason, Schaffer, Lyng, and Bevins.

³¹ *Ibid.*, esp. Dec. 3, Dec. 4, Dec. 6, Dec. 7. Bevins, who considered himself a political ally of Poole, said that Butcher Bill would lend his muscle to whichever side paid the most; *ibid.*, Dec. 8, 1855. About to face a charge of assault, Poole allegedly declared that one witness was worth forty lawyers, and he was willing to "persuade" friends to lie in court. *Ibid.*, Dec. 10, 1855. An anti-Know-Nothing newspaper called Poole a "half-cannibal and whole savage" and accused him of honing his skills at eye gouging on cattle and sheep, and of biting rats to death. See *Citizen*, March 17, 1855.

became embroiled in one street fight after another and was charged numerous times with attempted murder. Two months before Poole's death, Morrissey savagely beat Cyrus Shay, who carried a gun thereafter. And a few years after the Stanwix Hall affray Dad Cunningham shot and killed Paudeen McLaughlin, who had belittled Morrissey's fighting abilities.³²

Time and again, small slights or ill-chosen words or thoughtless gestures degenerated into savage violence. These men were acutely defensive of their honor; when violated it could be vindicated only through bloodshed. To accept an insult without response was to be shamed before one's equals; to back down from a real or perceived challenge meant losing face among the very people whose good opinion mattered most. Men of the streets craved each other's esteem, needed each other's acknowledgment, for the identity of every man was intimately tied to his standing within an all-male peer group. Theirs was an intensely masculine world where status was distributed according to prowess and bravado. A man's reputation depended on his ferocity, on his reliability in a gang fight, on his defiance of police and other outsiders, on his total devotion to his chums. Such individuals formed tight bonds, deep loyalties to small cliques, yet their alliances were frequently tenuous and short-lived, as they shifted from one faction to another within the turbulent sporting underworld of gambling parlors, saloons, and brothels. Ethnicity often cleaved the divisions between their groups, but personality conflicts, turf feuds over the control of vice, as well as neighborhood, gang, occupational, or political disputes also cut deeply. Nationalism—in the form of strident Irish patriotism or American chauvinism—was one vehicle among many for displays of masculine bravado, group loyalty, and bold self-assertion.³³

The contrast with the ascendant bourgeois and evangelical ideologies, with their emphases on piety, social harmony, virtuous labor, domestic bliss, and the spirit of improvement, could not have been more apparent. On the death of Poole, *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley condemned sporting life: "So long as drunkenness, gambling, prostitution, prize-fighting and their associate evils continue, so long we shall never be rid of the characters who constantly heap upon the City taxes and disgrace. The schools of vice are open, and hundreds are in training to take the places of those who now go to the grave or to prison." Greeley lamented that Poole's funeral encouraged young men "to prefer idleness, riot, vice, crime to labor, steady-

³² "Stanwix Hall Tragedy," *New York Daily Times*, Dec. 3, Dec. 4, Dec. 6, Dec. 7, Dec. 10, 1855. See also *ibid.*, Oct. 23, 1851, July 29, July 30, 1854, Jan. 8, 1855, March 9, March 10, March 15, 1855, March 22, March 23, 1858; *New York Daily Tribune*, March 8, March 10, 1855; *New York Sun*, Nov. 2, 1877; *New York Clipper*, June 24, 1854, Sept. 30, 1854; *Brooklyn Evening Star*, Jan. 11, 1855; George Walling, *Recollections of a New York Chief of Police* (New York, 1890), 375–76.

³³ See the description of Poole: "He was slow to give an insult, being restrained by a feeling of dignified self-respect, which was characteristic of him; but he was quick and fierce to resent an affront," *New York Daily Times*, March 9, 1855. American historians are just beginning to make use of the concept of honor, most often in studies of southern history. See, for example, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1982), esp. 3–114; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Yankee Saints and Southern Sinners* (Baton Rouge, 1985); Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th-Century American South* (New York, 1984), esp. 9–33; Elliott J. Gorn, "'Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch': The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry," *American Historical Review*, 90 (Feb. 1985), 38–42.



William Poole.

Reproduced from *The Life of William Poole, with a Full Account of the Terrible Affray in which He Received his Death Wound* (New York, 1855), facing page 35.

ness, respectability and virtue—to turn their backs on heaven.” At least, the editor prayed, Poole’s murder would encourage magistrates to put an end to ruffianism, political corruption, gambling, and the liquor trade.³⁴

The editor of the *New York Evangelist*, however, feared the “low population” had already become too powerful for the law to control. That the funeral of a notorious street brawler drew a bigger crowd than the noblest benevolent, patriotic, or religious event revealed how the lower classes had not yet “overcome the instincts of savage life. . . . Their appetites are still keen for scenes of blood and crime.” Worse, the ruffians and bullies, the shoulder-hitters and fancy men, were being organized into gangs to do the dirty work of unscrupulous politicians, gangs akin to the clubs of Paris during the Reign of Terror. Conscious of the economic panic and labor protest that preceded Poole’s death, the editor drew his own conclusions about the meaning of Butcher Bill’s transfiguration: “No man could witness the procession

³⁴ On Victorian culture, see Daniel Walker Howe, ed., *Victorian America* (Philadelphia, 1976). For Horace Greeley’s views, see *New York Daily Tribune*, March 1, March 9, March 10, 1855.



John Morrissey.

Reproduced from *The Life of William Poole, with a Full Account of the Terrible Affray in which He Received his Death Wound* (New York, 1855), facing page 36.

of Sunday, two miles in length, without being appalled at the materials of mobs and revolutions, which are here in the midst of us, which need only an outside pressure of great want, or fiery demagogues, to cause them to break forth." The solutions were to strengthen the mayor and police department, to urge all politicians to renounce the bullyboys, and to close every grogshop and rum-hole in New York City.³⁵

Delivering the sermon at Poole's funeral, the Reverend J. B. Wakeley also argued that the events of February 24 arose out of corruptions endemic to sporting life, and he offered a proper Victorian alternative: "What improvement can we make of this sad catastrophe? I trust it will have an influence in checking sporting gentlemen—pugilists—and preventing rowdyism; that we shall get rid of this fearful, withering curse; that his death will give to this a death blow, and that men will cease to destroy each other. It shows us the danger of carrying weapons of death. It shows us the evil of keeping open saloons, if they must be kept open at all, till a late hour in

³⁵ *New York Evangelist*, March 15, 1855. See also *Citizen*, March 17, 1855.

the night. . . . Home! Home! is the place of happiness—the place of safety.” Pugilism, drinking, gunplay—all were of a piece; all resulted when men renounced the taming influence of hearth and home; all could be eradicated by the moral power of the domestic circle and of its chief guardians, women. Wakeley concluded that Poole died repenting his sins and admonishing his companions to reform: “What would he say to his old associates: You see me a pale corpse; you and I have sported together; sport no more, war no more—prepare to meet thy God.”³⁶

Victorian mawkishness notwithstanding, there was an element of truth in Wakeley’s remarks. Baker, for example, was not married, and he sometimes slept on the floor of Lyng’s saloon. Poole and Morrissey both had wives, yet they chose to spend nights apart from their families, frequenting bars, billiard parlors, dance halls, and gambling houses until all hours. Both were ambitious men in their mid-twenties, but their temperaments and social backgrounds steered them away from conventional middle-class outlets for their energies. They and their compatriots adhered to their own values and behaviors: Not sober self-control, but treating companions to drinks and being treated in return; not saving for the future, but daredevil gambling; not internalized character, but a touchy sense of personal honor; not dogged industriousness, but revelry, conviviality, and good times; not the high-minded politics of reformers, but personalistic, rough-and-tumble, clique-based politics; not the sacred homelife of husband, wife, and children, but the raucous companionship and mutuality of male friends in male institutions. Poole and his crowd were emphatically not on the cutting edge of anything akin to the French Revolution or even the uprisings of 1848, but they did oppose by their deeds the ascendant bourgeois world view.³⁷

Rejection of the middle-class moral code was not confined exclusively to men in the netherworld of vice and violence. Individuals like Butcher Bill mirrored in exaggerated terms the cultural style of a large segment of the new working class. While it is impossible to be precise about numbers, thousands of young men walked the same path as Poole, Morrissey, and the others. As recent social histories demonstrate, some workers accepted bourgeois and evangelical ideologies, some even found success as businessmen, while others turned abstemiousness into a tool of group

³⁶ *New York Herald*, March 12, 1855. See also “Sermon on the Death of William Poole,” by Rev. George S. Hare, *New York Daily Times*, March 19, 1855. When an Episcopalian journal, the *New York Churchman*, condemned the Methodist J. B. Wakeley for officiating at Poole’s funeral, he accused the *Churchman* and its parent church of sympathy with the “Romanizing” party. Wakeley pointed with pride to his own past diatribes against rum, rowdiness, and vice. His only motive in delivering the sermon, he declared, was to reach out to the lowly, as the aristocratic Protestant Episcopal church failed to do. Joseph Beaumont Wakeley, *The Ethics of Funerals: A Vindication of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York, 1855).

³⁷ The primary occupations of those who testified at Baker’s murder trial seem to have been butcher, bartender, and emigrant runner; many were not employed. These men were extremely footloose; a large number migrated to California during the gold rush. “Stanwix Hall Tragedy,” *New York Daily Times*, Dec. 8, 1855; *New York Daily Times*, March 15, 1855. On urban street culture, see Jon M. Kingsdale, “‘The Poor Man’s Club’: Social Functions of the Urban Working-Class Saloon,” *American Quarterly*, 25 (Oct. 1973), 472–89; Bruce Laurie, “Fire Companies and Gangs in Southwark: The 1840’s” in *The Peoples of Philadelphia: A History of Ethnic Groups and Lower-Class Life, 1790–1940*, ed. Allen F. Davis and Mark H. Haller (Philadelphia, 1973), 71–88; and Susan G. Davis, “‘Making Night Hideous’: Christmas Revelry and Public Order in Nineteenth Century Philadelphia,” *American Quarterly*, 34 (Summer 1982), 185–99.



A Bowery Boy.

Reproduced from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, July 18, 1857.

pride and labor organizing. But many, perhaps most, refused to make the workplace the core of their emotional lives, finding an alternative source of identity in non-labor activities. With work time and free time more clearly bifurcated than ever, and with wage labor their lifelong fate, men now looked beyond shops and factories for a sense of self-esteem. Such individuals worked hard, even took pride in their efforts, but it was in the strut and swagger of leisure-time activities—centered around saloons, theaters, boxing matches, pleasure gardens, sporting houses, boardinghouses, and brothels—that these young men found their deepest sense of individual identity.³⁸

New York City's tradesmen and laborers were fascinated by the life and color of the Bowery. By day, they donned the butcher's smock, the tailor's apron, or the cartman's overalls, but when work ended, they assumed the colorful garb of the volunteer fireman or the gang member. Although native and Irish workers often fought each other bitterly, they had much in common. Those in the Bowery most

³⁸ The categories of pleasure-seeking traditionalists, abstemious probusiness conservatives, and radical workers, while useful, impose overly rigid categories on experience. Urban street life—the province of the so-called traditionalist workers—remains often mentioned and little studied by historians. Stott, "Worker in the Metropolis"; Buckley, "To the Opera House"; and Ellis, "Men among Men," help us see the problem with new complexity.

conspicuously strutting through the streets, crowding into theaters, sidling up to bars and challenging each other to fights were young men, ranging in age from their teens through their thirties. While many carried the title of apprentice or journeyman, nearly all had little hope of ever becoming anything more than employees. By the antebellum era, the lower wards of Manhattan were dominated demographically by young single males, wage earners who earned their livings with their muscles, then sought rough and exuberant pleasures after hours. The high energy levels of men at this stage of the life cycle and the narrow channels offered by "respectable" society caused them to seek other outlets for their vitality. Hard labor and limited chances taught them to admire muscular brawlers for their prowess, independence, and bravado. Confined to tedious and sometimes dangerous jobs, they made high-spirited devotion to gangs, neighborhoods, and ethnic groups an avocation. With economic prospects circumscribed, many married late or not at all, and even those with wives and families continued to dwell in the all-male world for long stretches after work. Theirs was a combative, physical way of life that offered the action, adventure, and autonomy denied in the workaday realm. After hours, free from masters and bosses, they gravitated toward places like the Bowery, where they took back a sense of control over their lives that the workplace denied.³⁹

Countless small factions gave scope to their values and ambitions. Volunteer fire companies offered a chance for real heroics, rough masculine camaraderie, and colorful display, qualities lacking in the prosaic bourgeois world of work, home, and church. Street corner gangs like the Irish Dead Rabbits or the native Bowery Boys perpetuated bitter, often violent, ethnic hostilities, but they also gave their adherents a sense of local loyalty, while reinforcing an ethos of toughness, defense of territory, and masculine honor. Through battles royal, petty crimes, and defiance of the police, gang members established individual status and cemented group bonds. Interwoven with fire companies and neighborhood cliques were political party organizations. Many laboring men worked at the ward level, became local leaders, and also engaged in more dubious practices like stuffing ballot boxes and strong-arming opponents at caucuses or on election days. Party politics was a source of grass-roots power, as aldermen and ward leaders facilitated naturalization of immigrants, got loyal supporters out of trouble with the law, and aided those in need of food, shelter, or jobs. Politics also offered a cluster of deeply satisfying symbols and rituals, affirming aggressive masculinity through displays of ethnic chauvinism or blustering nativism.⁴⁰

³⁹ Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 53–60; Brown, "Dead Rabbits—Bowery Boys Riot," 155–56; Buckley, "To the Opera House," 319–35. Stott argues quite persuasively that this rough and brawling culture was closely tied to the development of wage-based urban labor markets; he uses the phrase "high energy" to describe the workers' culture of work and play. Stott, "Worker in the Metropolis," 367–405. See also Ellis, "Men among Men," esp. ch. 1–3.

⁴⁰ Poole, for example, was a member of the Howard Engine Company Number 34. On the connection between the street brawlers and ward leaders, see *New York Daily Tribune*, March 4, 1855. See also Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 255–64; Brown, "Dead Rabbits—Bowery Boys Riot," 78–95; Spann, *New Metropolis*, 326–29, 336–50; Buckley, "To the Opera House," 319–35; Laurie, "Nothing On Compulsion," 337–66; Laurie, "Fire Companies," 71–87; Bridges, *City in the Republic*, 61–102; Mark H. Haller, "Recurring Themes," in *Peoples of Philadelphia*, ed. Haller and Davis, 277–90; Stott, "Worker in the Metropolis," 367–403; Ellis, "Men among Men," ch. 1–3, 8.

On one level, each little faction was a closed and insular world in which men relied on their shop mates, fellow gang members, brothers from the old country, and neighborhood chums, while distrusting outsiders. Yet despite deep divisions, all shared a way of life. In countless saloons working-class men momentarily set aside the daily experience of a heartless economy and the joyless ideologies that buttressed it, to revel in each other's company and to seek excitement together. They lived in a transitional culture that incorporated traditional elements—such as the secret societies and faction fighting of Ireland, and the blood sports and gambling of the English and American countrysides—into a new social structure that enforced strict divisions between employers and employees, work and play, moral and immoral behavior. Theirs was an oppositional culture, a living refutation of bourgeois and evangelical verities, a way of life paced by a contrapuntal rhythm: Mutuality, deep loyalties, and elaborate rituals of friendship on the one hand, fierce hatreds among rival cliques and intense competition for status on the other.⁴¹

Theirs was also a culture with a high potential for violence, because working-class existence encouraged callousness as one response to pain. To understand street life, we must first imagine the accidents that maimed and killed workers, the epidemics that devastated their families, the economic system that reduced many to pauperism with each downward turn of the business cycle. Violent market forces threw families off the land, debased skills, and left breadwinners chronically underemployed. The working classes of nineteenth-century American cities lived in a world filled with potential for disaster. A fighting cock's valor in the face of death, a bulldog's relentless charge into a bear's grasp, or a prizefighter's capacity to give and take punishment served them as models of how to confront a cruel life with honor. Men gloried in bloody displays because high death rates, horrible accidents, and the specter of brutish poverty were a burden that bravado helped lighten.⁴²

Fighting expressed the ethos of this culture, so bruisers like Poole, Morrissey, Hyer, and the others of lesser fame—men without a trace of Victorian squeamishness about shedding blood—were leaders of their street factions and heroes to a large segment of the working class. The distinction between brawling and formal boxing was not always clear in this era, and the word *pugilist* was used to describe any fighting man. Thus, Butcher Bill never entered the regular prize ring but was considered the equal of the great champions, because all of their reputations were based as much on street brawls as on stand-up fights. Ironically, Poole's murder at gunpoint signaled the decline of grit and muscle as the sole source of power on the streets, for at midcentury, cheap concealable revolving pistols were being marketed on a mass basis. But as of the winter of 1855, the use of guns remained an anomaly,

⁴¹ See Howe, ed., *Victorian America*; Brown, "'Dead Rabbits'—Bowery Boys Riot," 148–56; and Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 255–64.

⁴² Brown, "'Dead Rabbits'—Bowery Boys Riot," 113, 117; Bridges, *City in the Republic*, 116; Spann, *New Metropolis*, 71, 25–28, 134–51, 306–19; Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 117–19, 362–66; Roger Lane, *Violent Death in the City: Suicide, Accident, and Murder in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), 59–64, 117–24; Michael Feldberg, "Urbanization as a Cause of Violence: Philadelphia as a Test Case," in *Peoples of Philadelphia*, ed. Davis and Haller, 53–69.

a violation of the street culture's unwritten assumption that a reputation for toughness must be won bare-handed.⁴³

Perhaps most important, in the clash for political influence, ethnic dominance, and control of turf, the ability to use one's fists and command a group of loyal followers brought power, money, prestige, and independence. Where laborers grew increasingly subservient to bosses, the fighting men seemed autonomous; where most jobs now followed the soul-deadening beat of industrial working rhythms, street brawlers pursued their own activities at their own pace; where the bourgeois and evangelical ethics demanded piety and productivity, members of the sporting underworld found status in gambling, drinking, and carousing. In that social environment, ferocity carried real rewards. Tough men were legendary heroes to large segments of the working class not because of any political program or plan for social reform they espoused, but because in a world that rendered individual laborers small and powerless, the brawlers seemed defiant and unafraid. Here, then, on the urban streets were American society's "primitive rebels."⁴⁴

On those same streets William Poole met his end. For men threatened by the influx of Irish, his demise offered crystal clear proof of the nation's peril. For men whose trades were in jeopardy, his martyrdom explained the plight of labor. Momentarily, the righteous and the rowdy united under the banner of patriotic resistance to foreigners. But while the nativist exegesis offered antebellum New Yorkers a rich mythology, it also hid from view deeper causes of the incident. The Stanwix Hall affair derived its fullest significance from the clash of class-based as well as ethnic cultures, and that class schism often expressed itself in competing ideals of masculinity. Butcher Bill's murder and its aftermath revealed the deep chasm dividing respectable middle-class citizens from less genteel working-class ones. Poole lived in a world antithetical to Victorian proprieties, a world where political factionalism, gang hatreds, neighborhood rivalries, and blustering machismo often led to bloodshed. A shared love of prowess, adventure, and bravado united countless working-class young men, but those values also fed deep personal and social tensions, and sanctioned violence. Butcher Bill's murder then, was an extreme, but not an illogical, expression of the world he inhabited.⁴⁵

⁴³ Lane, *Violent Death in the City*, 59–63; Gorn, *Manly Art*, 129–47. Stott includes boxing as one of the central preoccupations of laboring men. Stott, "Worker in the Metropolis," ch. 7.

⁴⁴ On the central values and assumptions of bourgeois-evangelical Victorian culture, see Howe, ed., *Victorian America*; and Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven, 1982). On republicanism in nineteenth-century America, see Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*. On gambling, see Ann Fabian, "Rascals and Gentlemen: The Meaning of American Gambling, 1820–1890" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1983). On the saloon, see, for example, Kingsdale, "'Poor Man's Club,'" 472–89; and Ian R. Tyrrell, *Sobering Up: From Temperance to Prohibition in Antebellum America, 1800–1860* (Westport, 1979). On "prepolitical" forms of social rebellion, see Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York, 1959).

⁴⁵ For further discussion of the culture of the urban streets, see Gorn, *Manly Art*, 69–147; Stott, "Worker in the Metropolis," 367–403; Ellis, "Men among Men," ch. 1–3, 8; and Buckley, "To the Opera House."