

Living Dangerously

City Air Breathes Free

To chance their ambitions and desires, men and women came to New York from everywhere in the second half of the nineteenth century. And to Brooklyn, long since a lost American city.

Some hankered for property and wealth. Others sought only work and freedom of movement, including the freedom to find each other. But some also found danger.

In 1872 and 1873, in the sprouting, hyperactive city of Brooklyn, three persons of property found sudden death, and three young women with very different origins, owners of nothing, were accused of murdering them. Two of the dead and two of the suspects were settlers in the big cities; a third presumed murderess was the daughter of immigrants.

What happened to the second of the victims would not be immediately clear; how the third died would never be. But there was no question about who had killed George W. Watson.

Mild midwinter weather had turned frigid during the fourth week of January 1872. On Thursday, the 25th, the skating-ball had risen at the Lullwater in Brooklyn's sparkling-new Prospect Park,¹ and on Friday, as Henry Hyde dressed for work in his and his wife Fanny's apartment on Wythe Avenue in the Williamsburg section, the first light of day revealed a frozen blue sky above the East River.

Both were within easy walking-distance of their workplaces, which were in opposite directions from their home. Henry would head for the massive Appleton book-bindery, several blocks south on

Kent Avenue, which bordered the river; Fanny, for George Watson's hair-net factory in the Merrill Building a few blocks north.

Fanny dressed at her bureau. Atop her petticoat she put on a plain, slate-colored poplin dress, buttoned the sides of her ankle-high shoes, and, gazing into the bedroom mirror, pulled low on her dirty-blonde head a gray jockey cap with embroidered red flowers and a brown ribbon that secured a black feather.² She wrapped herself in a thick winter cloak, grabbed her satchel, and left for work. But this day she carried, in the bosom of her dress,³ a possession she had never brought there before.

Watson's business in Williamsburg was winding down. He had sold machinery about ten days earlier and taken the materials that were not yet finished into the third-floor shop of Fanny's uncle, where Watson had use of one table and worked side by side with Fanny, now his only employee.⁴ This morning, after hanging up her coat, jacket, and hat, she stepped over to the table with reluctance, for the previous day she had quarreled with him before she left the shop.⁵

Again this day they were seen talking heatedly, but were not clearly heard over the machinery's hum.⁶ She could no longer sit still beside him. At about eleven o'clock, she put down her work, dashed to the back of the shop and dropped herself into a soft chair beside the pot-bellied stove that vented through the back wall. She sat there for several minutes, staring across the room, until her Aunt Mary walked over to her.

Family members sensed something was amiss with Fanny when she seemed unconcerned about her appearance. "What an old dress you have on," her aunt remarked.

"It's good enough for me," Fanny responded. She had partially covered it with a shawl.

Mary asked how she was.

"I wish I was dead," she said.

"What for?"

"A good many things."

Mary Dexter was the first of several persons to observe a painful, distraught look in Fanny's face—"wild," she would call it, and "pale."⁷

There was a problem with third-floor toilet,⁸ so Fanny left the shop, went downstairs and knocked on the door of the velvet-weaving shop. Henry Potts, one of the weavers, opened the door, and Fanny, without speaking, stepped briskly past him and headed to the "water-

closet.” There was something “singular” in her expression that he could “hardly describe”—“Her eyes were red and swollen.” He waited for her, so that he could let her out of the shop, and when she didn’t come out as soon as he expected, he went back to work.⁹

Fanny’s stepmother, Sarah Windley, was working on that floor that morning, and Fanny stopped to talk to her. The girl at the same table noted that Fanny, uncharacteristically, ignored her, and that she looked “wild and very much excited.”¹⁰

When she returned upstairs, Watson accused her of making love to Henry Potts, charged that she was “nothing but a prostitute and a whore,” and pressed her to “go with him.”

At about 11:45 Fanny again found the toilet unavailable, and once more went downstairs and knocked at the door of the velvet-shop. But she was not heard in the workplace din, and headed back upstairs, intending to try once more at noon, when the lunch whistle would halt all work. At the top of the stairs, on the third-floor landing, she saw George Watson.¹¹

It was Watson’s habit to leave for lunch about five minutes before the whistle, but this day he left earlier, about three minutes after Fanny had stepped out.¹² He was wearing a light overcoat. No one witnessed their encounter in the hallway, but between Watson’s leaving and the next time anyone saw Fanny, there would have been enough time—seven or eight minutes—for the scene that Fanny would remember to have occurred:

“I saw him there before I went up the stairs. I asked him if he was going downstairs. He said no; he had to go back for something. I thought he had gone in; when I got to the top of the stairs, he seized hold of me . . . in a very indecent manner.”

She did not remember exactly what he said, only that he repeated what he had demanded in the shop: “He wanted me to go to a room outside somewhere.”

She tried, she said, to break loose from him—“we had quite a struggle. I got free from him, and he seized me the second time.”

She claimed to remember nothing else, except one detail that seems unlikely—that she had already taken a pistol from between her breasts before he had grabbed her the second time.¹³ In fact she must have been downstairs from him when she released what she said was the only bullet in the gun,¹⁴ for it struck him from several feet away through his coat collar and into the neck below his right ear, and

traveled upward across his brain. Watson dropped and tumbled past her down the 15 iron steps until his torso and the back of his head, with its spurting, fatal wound, settled on the second-floor landing—his splayed legs tilting upward onto the bottom stairs.¹⁵

A native of the little sheep-raising town of Plainfield in Massachusetts's Berkshire Hills, George W. Watson had arrived in Brooklyn in 1850, when he was 23. He had come, most likely, to work for Ager Pixley, a widower and manufacturer of hosiery who lived with his 20-year-old daughter, Eliza, on Hicks Street on Brooklyn Heights.¹⁶ In that brick-and-brownstone neighborhood above the East River, which would be known as New York's first suburb, Watson rented a room, and in September 1853 he married Eliza Pixley.¹⁷

It was the month Fanny Windley was born.

The Windleys were from Nottingham, a fast-growing industrial city in the middle of England, where they all labored in its signature lace and silk trades.¹⁸ Hattie Windley died when her children, Samuel, Fanny, and Alice, were five, four, and two, and John, their father, unable to earn enough to support them, sent them to work as soon as they were able.¹⁹

They came to New York during the American Civil War on three-masted, iron-hulled British ships that were hybrids of steam and sail.²⁰ John Windley, just turning 30, landed on the *Edinburgh* in February 1864, and the next October his second wife, Sarah, 26, brought her stepchildren on the *Louisiana*. Their steerage tickets from Liverpool cost about \$30.

On the Port of New York manifest, 11-year-old Fanny, christened Frances, who had been a factory-girl at eight, was entered as a "boy" named "Francis."²¹ That was an ironic error, for the clamor that would surround her American story would be all about her being female.

Something troubled Eliza Watson's health in the early years of her marriage to George, and a Brooklyn doctor took the odd notion that she should move away from the sea. Her husband brought her back to the bucolic Berkshires and sold produce. But manufacturing had become George Watson's vocation and path to a substantial

income, and in the 1860s he picked up that trade again in Hartford, Connecticut.²²

The Windleys of Nottingham had New York connections that had been formed in England, and Samuel and Fanny were hired right away—she by the velvet-manufacturer A. P. Bachman of Franklin Street in lower Manhattan. She later worked for more than two years for a lacemaker who had been the Windleys' neighbor back home. John Marr remembered her as having been, at age 12 and 13, the brightest and most competent girl whom he and his wife employed. "A good girl in the work-room, and her conduct, too, was very good," said Sarah Marr, who supervised her. She was "as good a girl as I would wish to have." Fanny often visited the Marrs' home to play with their children, and between factory jobs she sometimes made money caring for kids. When not at work, Fanny was a dutiful student at night school and Sunday school.²³

As she reached her teens she no longer looked like a boy. She grew to five-feet-two, slender but well-figured. She had alluring blue eyes and a healthy flush in her face, and was considered pretty.²⁴

By the end of the 1860s, while Eliza Watson raised five children in Hartford, her husband stayed mostly in Brooklyn. He had returned south to become a supervisor for and perhaps a partner of A. P. Bachman, Fanny's former boss, who now owned operations in the Charles Merrill and Sons Building in the northern Brooklyn industrial hive of Williamsburg. There, on the corner of First Street and South 11th Street, across from a riverside gas-works, Watson opened the shop that produced silk hair-nets.²⁵

Ager Pixley, now in his late 60s, also worked in the Merrill Building, and would remark that his son-in-law was a "dutiful husband" who returned every other week to Hartford, where the youngest of his and Eliza's children was a toddler, and the eldest was about the age of the teenage girls that her father employed.²⁶

A few years after landing in New York, the Windleys too moved to Brooklyn, settling amid the factories and docks of Williamsburg,²⁷ where all the family went to work in the Merrill Building. Fanny transferred to the Bridge Street Primitive Methodist School in downtown

Brooklyn, which she attended regularly for two years. Officials there also described her comportment as “good” or “excellent,” and invited her to speak at one of their evening presentations.²⁸

John Windley conceded that he was more strict with his children than he “would have been if their own mother had been alive,” and Fanny would say that both her father and stepmother had been strict with her.²⁹ But a girl who begins working for wages as a child, and in a strange city before puberty, feels other influences and grows up quickly.

She was 15 when, in February 1869, she reported to George Watson’s third-floor hair-net shop.³⁰ At 42, he was trim and handsome, five-feet-nine, with a full black beard tinged with gray; with wavy, receding black hair, high, prominent cheekbones and deep-set eyes.³¹ Watson was sportive and indulgent with the girls who worked for him, and to some other men in the shop he seemed inappropriately familiar with them. These men noticed him frequently joking with the girls, leaning over them and talking to them as they worked, or tapping their shoulders and laughing when they turned to him. He ordered treats brought into the shop for them—oyster stews and sweets. At least two co-workers chided him about these things.

His obvious favorite was Fanny. He appointed her a forewoman, and by the fall of that year he seemed to be constantly near her, working beside her at a table and talking to her, or, if she left the shop, following her. “Hundreds of times” he was seen going after her into the corridor or into another shop. He also followed her to Sunday school, and on the evening of her presentation he tossed a bouquet onto the stage, an act that a staff member at the school “never saw anything of the kind” in 10 years there. In the middle of one November afternoon, one of the men at the factory opened a door to the corridor and found Watson with an arm around Fanny’s back and kissing her. She was not resisting him.³² The same man and other workers were aware of several times when Watson asked Fanny to stay and work with him alone after everyone else had left.³³

By that time George Watson and Fanny Windley, who turned 16 in September 1869, had been sexually intimate for months.

He Told Her Not to Do It

Fanny Windley’s own recollection would be that she and George Watson became involved during the first summer she worked for

him. One afternoon he gave her a job to take home and told her to come back at nine the following morning for elastics to attach to the nets. She didn't describe how it happened, but said that there, that morning, he seduced her. He had access to at least one third-floor room that could be locked, and there was a bedroom on the second floor. Perhaps it had been a Sunday, when the shop was closed, but Watson was hardly discreet about his ardor. He also began to visit Fanny at her family's apartment.³⁴

During these months, and into early 1870, her parents noticed changes in her appearance and manner. She grew pale and thin. She seemed careless about her dress, and her father found her to be less obliging, inattentive to his requests, and increasingly irritable.³⁵ Apart from any emotional conflict that she might have been feeling, Fanny suffered from painful menstruation—"dysmenorrhea." It bothered her on the day of that first experience with Watson, and she thought that it was aggravated by their relations. Her periods were also irregular, and Watson, fearing that she was pregnant, gave her abortifacient pills and asked her to move to New York and to see a physician there. She refused to do either,³⁶ and it is unclear that she ever did become pregnant by him.

During that first part of 1870, John Windley heard a rumor about Fanny's relations with Watson, but believed this was malicious talk that had been put in motion by a man who held a grudge against him. He did mention the rumor to Fanny, quietly, if for no other reason than to determine whether or not she was aware it. She reacted sharply, and told him that she was old enough to take care of herself. He never mentioned it again.³⁷ And shortly afterward, in March, she left his home and moved into a place she called "the homestead"—a boarding-house.

There she met Henry Hyde, a thin, boyish-looking 21-year-old who, in addition to his job as a bookbinder at the Appleton plant on Kent Avenue, also began to work in Watson's shop.³⁸ On May 6th, 1870, without telling her family, she married him.³⁹ John Windley did not know about it until two months later. Fanny told him one day when they were both at work, but she didn't explain why she had married so quickly and secretly. Nor did he ask, because he "thought if she had married and made her bed, she had better lie in it."⁴⁰

Fanny did inform Watson of her coming marriage, and he promised that if she did marry, he would "leave her alone." She made him swear to this on a bible. But a few days after the wedding he

began to follow her again, and he attempted to rent a room across the street from the Hydes on Wythe Avenue, a block from the river. Although Fanny may have had the option of quitting and taking a job with her father or uncle, she continued to work for Watson because the money—\$10 a week—was better. Within two months they had sex again.⁴¹

The geography changed for a while in the spring of 1871. Fanny traveled to Washington in April to stay with her mother-in-law and visit a Dr. Elliott, president of that city's medical board, about her condition. She told Margaret Hyde while she was there, "I feel that there is a curse hanging over me."⁴²

Fanny had a chance to make this trip because Watson, having dissolved his arrangement with Bachman, had gone north to operate a factory in New Britain, Connecticut,⁴³ and there was little or no work for her in Brooklyn. Henry had moved to New Britain, and he sent Fanny in Washington a letter asking her to join him.⁴⁴ She traveled up about the first of May, and she and Henry remained there until sometime in July, when they went back to Brooklyn.

In the fall, Watson also returned, and, in Fanny's telling, he did not leave her alone. He threatened to expose her, and he applied sexual blackmail. Their intimacy resumed, and his lust had become entwined with nagging jealousy. "He was always accusing me of going with other men," said Fanny.

He would call at her home on Wythe Avenue, where she worked during the last months of 1871, while Henry resumed his job at the Appleton Bindery. It was a time, Fanny would remember, when she was "always thinking about" the liaison with Watson and "cried about it continually."⁴⁵

Yet it went on for months, despite some stormy moments between them. A friend of Henry Hyde remembered occasions during those months on which he heard Henry ordering Watson to leave the house, and Fanny telling him that he was no longer welcome.⁴⁶ But she admitted that, after doing that in January 1872, she had sex with him again the next week.⁴⁷

Her feelings, though, had turned poisonous. One day around the middle of that month, after she had returned to Watson's shop in the Merrill Building, she and her brother Sam walked into the gun-and-locksmith shop of Nelson J. Stowell at 86 Broadway in

Williamsburg and asked to see some pistols. Stowell handed Sam a Sharps four-barrel revolver; Sam held it toward Fanny and asked if it “would suit” her. She said it would. Fanny would claim that she bought it for her husband as a delayed New Year’s gift, but Stowell would remember that Sam had paid for it. When they got it to her apartment, neither Henry nor Sam could figure out how to operate it, so “two or three days” later, according to Stowell, Sam returned for a lesson; then, on Wednesday, the 24th of January, or Thursday, the 25th, he purchased cartridges for it.⁴⁸

Ellen Curley, who worked for Fanny’s uncle, John Dexter, had left the shop in the Merrill Building at 11:50 that Friday morning and gone to a grocery on nearby Division Avenue to pick up the makings of her lunch, which she would bring back to the factory. She returned a few minutes before noon, entered through the door on the South 11th Street side, and, climbing the first flight of iron stairs, was startled by the sight of Fanny Hyde kicking at the door of the second-floor “plush” or velvet room, wringing her hands and making a sound that Ellen first thought to be singing, but soon realized was moaning. She would report that, before anyone answered the knock, Fanny turned to her and told her that she had killed George Watson, and that he was lying at the foot of the second flight of stairs. Ellen didn’t see a gun, and no one in the buzzing building had heard the shot.

Go tell the men in the plush room, Fanny shouted, that Watson is dead and lying in the hall. Ellen, in a frenzy, banged on the door.

It was opened at last by Ager Pixley. The only words that Ellen could get out were “Watson! Hall!”—then she bolted past him to tell the others.⁴⁹ Pixley, then Henry Potts and Charles Merrill, rushed to attend to Watson. Pixley heard Fanny say something about Watson’s having fallen down the steps, and, before picking up his son-in-law’s head, he tried in vain to stop the blood that flowed “as thick as a pipe stem” from the wound below his ear. He still had a pulse, so Potts ran off to find a Doctor Brady, but when he returned another doctor had arrived and was just pronouncing Watson dead.⁵⁰

The noon whistle had sounded, and Ellen had run up to tell the news on the third floor. It was getting crowded around Watson and the pool of blood spreading on the second-floor landing. John and Mary Dexter and John and Sam Windley came down. Mary at

first assumed that Watson had fallen down the steps, then, seeing her niece crying, asked what was wrong.

“Watson has been the ruination of me,” said Fanny, “and I shot him.”⁵¹

Sam grabbed the stair-post with one hand, and turned to his sister, who stood with a hand on her forehead, staring into Watson’s face. Ager Pixley would be clear about what he then heard and saw.

“Fanny,” Sam called to her, raising, then sweeping down his free arm, “I told you not to do it!” Then he swung himself over the victim and rushed up the stairs.⁵²

A Terrible Thing to Tell

Pixley took charge of the body, and helped to move it onto a table in the plush room. Then Coroner Lawrence A. Whitehill allowed Pixley to take the remains to his home on Hudson Avenue,⁵³ on the other side of the Brooklyn Navy Yard, where police surgeon Joseph Creamer conducted an autopsy. He removed the dead man’s scalp and found the bullet—he called it a “ball”—lodged in his brain. Traveling obliquely, it had crossed the top of his spinal cord. There were abrasions above Watson’s left eye and down his face, and a wound atop his head that Creamer attributed to his fall, not to a struggle with his killer.⁵⁴

Between one and two o’clock, Fanny’s husband, father and brother walked with her to the Fifth Precinct station-house, more than half a mile north at the corner of North First Street and Fourth Street, which would soon become Bedford Avenue. Henry Hyde spoke first and handed the pistol to Captain Cornelius Woglom, a square-faced, 56-year-old former alderman who was called “the Chief of Williamsburg.”

“I have a terrible thing to tell you,” Henry said to him.

Fanny said that it had been her idea to “give herself up,”⁵⁵ and she was not reticent when she got there. She told her story and admitted the shooting to Woglom, to the desk sergeant, to the detective who brought her by streetcar to downtown headquarters the following day, and then to Chief Patrick Campbell.⁵⁶ She also spoke briefly to reporters at the precinct-house.

A man from *The Brooklyn Eagle* arrived there the same afternoon, and had to push through “a great crowd” on the corner to be

admitted. He was allowed to visit the prisoner in the captain's office, but she "very snappishly" declined to talk to him. Her husband, though, had a few things to say—that she had shot Watson because he had insulted her, and that he "had committed a rape on her" before their marriage.

The *Brooklyn Union's* reporter got more out of her that evening, although she had seen a lawyer by then and would not discuss the shooting. When he asked if Watson had ever "wronged" her, "the blood mantled to the cheek of the woman, her eyes even flashed with fire, and drawing nearer to the bars of her cell, and pressing her arms even more closely around her, she said, 'Yes, sir; he wronged me, cruelly wronged me, both before and after marriage.'" She "thereupon retreated to a distant part of the cell," and he understood that the interview was over.

To the *New York Herald's* representative she would only speak, tearfully, of her early childhood in Nottingham and her coming to America. And when she found time to relax in the following days, she passed part of it reading a novel, *Put Yourself in His Place*, by a popular English adventure-writer, Charles Reade.

The newsmen each appraised her appearance differently through engaged masculine eyes. Her figure, wrote the *Eagle's* man, was "only medium in size and attractiveness." But the *Union* found her "delicately formed," with "calm, quiet, intelligent features, and a dark, lustrous blue eye." Her hair seemed to him light-brown and somewhat short, but to the *Eagle* it was "long" and "yellow." To the *Herald's* observer, she was "an interesting and *petite* woman of mild and pleasing aspect, and her large blue eyes have a kindly gleam in them very different from what would be expected in those of a malicious and ferocious murderer."⁵⁷ Such differences in observation are symptomatic variations of nineteenth-century reporting. Yet even the two available drawings of her seem to depict different women, although in each she is wearing the same dress and boa and her head is poised in an identical attitude. In one portrait, a drawing that may have been rendered from a photograph, her hair is light and neatly combed, her eyes limpid. It shows a more feminine, more traditionally pretty, face than the full-front-page engraving in the *National Police Gazette*, where her hair is as dark as a headline and straight, parted in the middle, above an oval face with deep eyes and a long, straight nose. Despite the variation, the latter, according to one professional opinion, may

have been copied from the first. It could have been that the *Gazette's* artist had seen Fanny after her arrest, and incorporated his impression of an agitated, somewhat disheveled young woman.

No one had yet remarked on her voice, and whether it retained any traces of middle England. But it is likely that such features had all but disappeared in a girl who had emigrated so young.

The coroner's inquest began on the evening of the murder, as close as possible to where it happened—in the plush room of the Merrill Building, to reach which the participants had to step around the wide smear of George Watson's blood that had been blanketed with ashes. The room was a large loft, heated by a central stove and lit by four kerosene lamps. At a small marble table sat Coroner Lawrence A. Whitehill and Fanny's attorney, Patrick Keady, who was Brooklyn fire marshal and had also served as a Democratic assemblyman. At another, larger table sat representatives of many Brooklyn and New York newspapers. Ellen Curley was the first of several witnesses of the shooting's aftermath to be examined before a jury of eight men who sat around them.

Fanny was not able to change clothes in her jail-cell, but she had a chance to freshen up and add a few articles that had been delivered to her. Still wearing the plain gray dress that her Aunt Mary had demeaned that morning, she had fitted over it a bright-blue velvet "sacque," or bodice, and about her neck the boa of gray fur with matching muff. She sat serenely in an armchair before the stove, those limpid eyes moving around to all the faces in the room. Near her still were her husband, father and brother, joined now by her 16-year-old sister, Alice, whose face was puffed from crying. After Henry Potts had testified, Fanny took the stand, but, at Keady's direction, offered only her age, address, marital and employment status. Whitehill then granted him an adjournment, and Fanny was escorted back to the station, where she dropped onto the mattress in her cell and, moaning, hid her face in her hands. Henry was allowed to sit all night with her, relieved in the morning by Sam.⁵⁸

The next night, Saturday, the venue switched to the courthouse at Fifth and South First Streets. By ten minutes to eight, when she was let out of her cell, the precinct-house was filled with friends, the sight of whom brought her to tears, and she dabbed her eyes with a sheer veil that she was carrying. An unidentified woman of about 40

embraced her and cried, "Oh, Fanny, Fanny, I'm sorry for you, my child!" The group then followed her on her route of a few blocks, "like people," wrote one reporter, "going to the funeral of a dearly loved friend." They were joined by many others along the way, and he estimated that five hundred persons had gathered at the court, only half of whom were admitted, jamming the room beyond capacity while the others pressed at the doors.⁵⁹ Fanny was wearing her veil when she arrived, and when, after several minutes, she removed it, her "calm, cold features" drew every eye in the courtroom.⁶⁰

Keady was now joined by Samuel D. Morris, the just-replaced Kings County district attorney, who would lead Fanny's defense. She was recalled, and again gave no material information. Neither did her husband, who followed. Mary Dexter stated that Fanny had admitted to the shooting, and John, her husband, brought laughter to the room when he mentioned that he never had heard the killer and victim talk to each other "because they would stop as soon as I came up." Ager Pixley recalled Sam's remonstrance that he had told his sister not to do it⁶¹—and from that point Sam was no longer seen in public.

The curious masses thronged to the courthouse again for the inquest's conclusion the following Tuesday night, and those who weren't admitted hooted and shouted in objection. Fanny was upset and slumped at her table. It was 8:30, a half-hour late, when testimony, which included the responses of Stowell the gunsmith, Dr. Creamer, and Captain Woglom, began. At evening's end, six of the eight jurors agreed on a verdict:

"We find that George W. Watson came to his death by a pistol shot fired from a pistol in the hands of Frances Hyde, with malice aforethought."

The *Eagle* described this verdict as one of "the most sensible of modern times," but had "small apprehension that in the present temper of Brooklyn the trial of Mrs. Hyde will not be as fair and unsentimental as the trial of a man murderer would be."⁶²

She was transferred the next day to the County Jail at Raymond Street, where she was given a cell in an unoccupied tier, the entire corridor of which she was free to walk in.⁶³

Determined to disparage her, the *Eagle* raised two hostile theories about her motive. One was that Watson "was perfectly innocent of any criminal relations to her," but had objected vehemently to her carrying on with someone else at the factory. Another was that he

had paid her for sex, and that she had shot him when he decided to end the deal.⁶⁴

And it forcefully rejected all favorable assessments of her appearance and character:

She is a small, thin undersized girl of eighteen, with a pinched face, all the thinner for her worry. Her eyes are small, but bright, and her cheekbones protrude far enough to spoil any beauty she might otherwise possess. Her hair is colorless and thin, and her figure scrawny and fleshless. She speaks in a little piping querulous voice, betraying an evident lack of resolution. There is nothing of the heroine about her. She looks like a small souled, uneducated, factory girl, whose head has been overturned by flash literature and whose mind is almost overturned by the daily growing realization of her condition. She looks evidently what she is, a wretched little creature, who committed a crime whose magnitude she is only just beginning to comprehend, and from whose effects she would, if she could, shrink into the very dust.

It hardly seemed possible that George Watson could have “follow[ed] to the death such an uninteresting young woman.” Indeed, such a folly would have been “a sufficient reason for his death.”⁶⁵

Many newspaper-editors in New York and Brooklyn complained about judicial delay and growing sentiment for killers who had been motivated by jealousy or related passions. Such murderers, wrote the *Herald* the same week, “always find their apologists among decent people, who never saw the gashed, riddled or jellied corpse of the victim.”⁶⁶ And the apologies were most predictable when the avengers were women. An outcome often maligned was the ballyhooed prosecution of Laura Fair of San Francisco, who had shot her lover in front of his wife and children in November 1870, then pled temporary insanity, associated with menstrual problems similar to Fanny Hyde’s. She had been convicted and sentenced to hang, but the California Supreme Court had overturned the verdict on technical grounds, and she was acquitted on the insanity plea the second time around.⁶⁷

The twin cities had become preoccupied by murder. They had been shocked the previous spring by the unprovoked slaughter of a passenger on a midtown Manhattan streetcar by a drunk wielding the driver's "car hook." Another clubbing-murder, of the financier-philanthropist Benjamin Nathan in his 23d-Street bedroom in 1870, remained vivid in the public mind because it had not been solved. And most vivid of all was the shooting to death on January 7th, 1872, of the railroad tycoon and bouncer Jim Fisk by his romantic rival Ned Stokes in a downtown New York hotel. On the day of the Watson killing, before it was reported, the *Eagle* had ruminated about murder and punishment in New York. There had, it stated, been 146 murders counted in Manhattan during the previous year, while in the state of New Jersey, with "about an equal population," there had been fewer than "one every two months." But "that Commonwealth has a habit of hanging murderers. . . . Oh, for one year of Jersey justice in New York!"⁶⁸

So the undoing of George Watson also was announced as "Another Murder"⁶⁹ to a City of Brooklyn that felt itself to be under a siege of violence. Indeed, the people's anxiety had been whetted during the week by a deadly attack near the Brooklyn Navy Yard against a quiet, slightly built, gentlemanly piano-instructor heading home from a lesson.

John B. Panormo, a 42-year-old native Londoner, was well-known as both a teacher and performer, and had been featured with his pupils in a recital at the Brooklyn Institute on the evening of Monday, January 22nd. The next night he resumed his rounds of private tutoring, and sometime before ten o'clock he left a house on Cumberland Street and turned toward Myrtle Avenue to catch a horsecar. The district, known as "the Hill," was largely residential but the vast navy yard brooded dourly over it on a winter night, and it had become one of the most dangerous areas in the city, known to be haunted by a nocturnal gang intending to rob houses or pedestrians. On that evening two men attacked "Professor" Panormo and swiped his watch, and he was found lying on a sidewalk battered and profusely bleeding. Some Samaritans took him to a druggist who exhorted them to find a doctor, suggested that the victim would be better off remaining in the "fresh air," and shut down his shop after they left. When they returned Panormo was gone.

He had found his way to Myrtle and hailed the car, which was headed west to downtown and Brooklyn Heights, where he lived in a boarding-house at the corner of Fulton and Pineapple Streets. The people's outrage was exacerbated by reports that neither a physician nor a policeman on the car had raised a hand to help the grievously wounded little teacher, who insisted that he simply wanted to be let off at Pineapple. At home he was treated at last by a doctor, but there, in Mrs. Snow's parlor, he died the next morning.⁷⁰

The papers wailed in unison about the inefficiency of the police departments, particularly after it became known that on the night of Panormo's killing 24 officers of the Fourth Precinct had been assigned to a primary-election polling-place where their captain's brother was winning a race for a committee-seat.⁷¹ And, by week's end, both the *Brooklyn Eagle* and the *New York Herald* were exclaiming "Murder Mania"—outraged by more street attacks, by a ferocious beating of a man who'd been dragged from his home by an inner-Brooklyn gang, and by the shooting of a young New York man by his father,⁷² as well as the Panormo and Watson murders. Then on Sunday morning 25-year-old Alfred East shot himself in his room at Mrs. Snow's boarding-house.⁷³ One account stated that he had shared that room with the professor, and that they "seemed to be on terms of the utmost intimacy."⁷⁴

The *National Police Gazette* printed a full-page illustration of four of these alarming events around a central scene in which George Watson leaned and whispered over Fanny Hyde's shoulder.⁷⁵ And it was noted as "a singular coincidence" that Watson, in his early years in Brooklyn, had lived in the same accursed residence on Pineapple Street where Panormo and East had died.⁷⁶



Lost City

*Up with the flag; be far the day
When Brooklyn's ever-honored name
From glory's role is wiped away
And buried in the book of shame.*

—song opposing consolidation of Brooklyn and New York

Where the city of Brooklyn bulged into the East River at Fulton Ferry, less than half a mile separated it from downtown New York. Between their two city halls was a mile-and-a-half. Twin cities, yes and no. New York was firmly established as the leading commercial, financial, industrial and, with a nod to Boston, literary and cultural city in America. Brooklyn lived in its long shadow, but lived generally well, as “the City of Homes and Churches.” It did not lead the country in much except in baseball and Protestant oratory and the manufacture of certain goods like rope, sugar, and whisky,⁷⁷ but it was a major city, no doubt, a very big port city that, since its late-occurring incorporation in 1834, was growing faster than any comparably sized place in America. In 1860, spreading south and east in block upon block of brick, brownstone, and wooden-frame homes, and having annexed the northward city of Williamsburgh (and dropped the “h”), it became the nation’s third-largest city, and would remain so until 1890. Its 1870 population was just a tick under 400,000,⁷⁸ and, as New York’s neared a million, its leaders and editors realized that Brooklyn was far too substantial an entity to ignore.

Big it was and, like New York, lively, tumultuous, contentious, and abundantly interesting. And in Brooklyn, as in New York, the newspapers, in an age of expanding, passionate, eloquent journalism, embraced with relish the growing complexity of urban life, the pains and challenges of growth itself, of the development of the modern American city. They reported vividly, if, in the rush to press, often inaccurately, and they savored particularly the competition to describe crimes like the murders of George Watson, the trials of criminals, and the battlefields of politics. In fact, they were themselves batteries on those battlefields, and nowhere was the action hotter than between two Brooklyn dailies edited by fiercely partisan political operators.

In the winter of 1872 one of these partisans, Thomas Kinsella, had left his editor’s desk at the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* to take one of Brooklyn’s two Democratic seats in Congress, where he was involved in clearing the many illicit whisky distilleries out of the Fifth Ward and in arguing for the construction of a federal building in his bulging city. He had just turned 39, and had traveled an admirable distance since arriving in New York, supposedly as an orphan boy or adolescent, from Ireland’s County Wexford. Kinsella, who most likely accented his name on the first syllable, was described by Dr. Henry

R. Stiles in his 1884 Brooklyn history as “an ideal self-made man,” who, “while the basis of his character was Irish, its development and embellishment were wholly American.” The newspaper he ran was the oldest, most popular and influential of the city’s three dailies, all published in the afternoon, and indeed it had become the most widely read afternoon paper in the country. He had started there as a typesetter and become its very young editor in 1861, when his predecessor, Henry McCloskey, also an Irish-born Catholic, resigned after his pro-secession policy had prompted the postmaster-general to bar the paper from the mail, and federal authorities had threatened to suspend its publication. Kinsella’s *Eagle* supported the government and the war against the South, although it remained Democratic and critical of President Lincoln, and his editorials were no less forceful and stylish than McCloskey’s.

Combining journalism with civic service, he became one of Brooklyn’s most prominent public men. He was a member of the Board of Education, where he advocated equal pay for women, and sat on the water-and-sewer board. He was a very active trustee of the East River Bridge, which began to be built in 1870. And in Congress, allied with the Liberal Republican movement, he was, a rival paper would write, “chiefly responsible” for *New York Herald* publisher Horace Greeley’s presidential run on the Democratic ticket in 1872. Yet his time in Washington was a detour in his career. He would serve just one term, and return to the *Eagle* full-time at the start of ’73.⁷⁹

The *Eagle*’s alignment with the national cause was not thorough enough for the city’s radical Republicans, who one night at the start of the war had marched to the paper’s Fulton Street offices and demanded that a man who appeared at a window “hang out your flag,” which he promptly did.⁸⁰ Then, in September 1863, some party leaders established a paper with a title that made their allegiance explicit—the *Daily Union*. It was linked in spirit to the less forthrightly named *Independent*, a weekly organ of the Brooklyn and New York Congregational Church, which Brooklyn’s celebrity pastor Henry Ward Beecher regularly contributed to and later edited. Both papers were eventually owned by Henry C. Bowen, a Connecticut native who had come to New York and made a fortune in dry goods, settled in the grandest, most lavishly appointed home on elegant Brooklyn Heights, and prevailed upon Beecher to establish himself at Plymouth Church. It was Bowen too who invited candidate Lincoln to visit

Beecher's church and deliver his groundbreaking campaign-speech at Cooper Union in New York. The *Independent* prospered in the 1860s under Beecher as editor and the talented young managing editor, and Beecher companion, Theodore Tilton, whom Bowen would also appoint editor of the *Union* in 1870.⁸¹ In these years Beecher, Bowen and Tilton were joined in the public mind as "The Trinity of Plymouth Church."⁸² But in the 1870s the bonds that linked them would strain and break under public pressure, and in history they are linked as the three central male figures in the thunderous Henry Ward Beecher adultery scandal. In the same period the animosity between Kinsella and Bowen burst into flame.

Beecher was much more than the city's best-known citizen—a recent biographer has called him "The Most Famous Man in America." The son of a fiery, sometimes controversial New England clergyman, he had set out to surpass his father, as well as several ministerial brothers, in theological demagoguery, and sensationally succeeded. He first drew wide attention in Indianapolis, from where, in 1847, at age 34, he shifted to Brooklyn and oversaw the construction of a massive but bland Brooklyn Heights church, on the platform of which he would perfect the theatrics that included voice-modulation, weeping, foot-stamping, fist-thumping, and a variety of solo acts such as a drunk appealing to a judge or a fisherman landing a trout. His celebrity grew during the turbulent pre-war years when he became the most eloquent abolitionist voice in the country and sealed his position by conducting mock slave-auctions on his stage. His histrionics yielded hysterics. So desirable was one of the 2,100 upholstered seats, or a supplementary chair, or even a space to stand in the auditorium of Plymouth Congregational Church on Orange Street that policemen were employed to regulate admission. Many applicants crossed from New York on Sunday ferries that were known as "Beecher Boats." According to different accounts, by 1870 the great man they came to see and hear earned or had humbly turned down a salary of \$20,000 a year, and made nearly that much in speaking-fees and from publications that included a collection of his sermons and a novel.⁸³

Many well-known Brooklynites were citizens of two cities, with homes in Brooklyn and offices in New York. The 11 intercity ferries⁸⁴ in the 1870s were thronged in the mornings and early evenings in only one direction, yet it was hardly the case that New York sucked

away all of Brooklyn's talent. While it remained a city—until 1898—Brooklyn proudly represented itself and proclaimed its own identity. It did not want to be New York, but was glad enough to have New York stirring beside it. It wished to be better-governed than its neighbor, to have cleaner, more-verdant, less-congested streets, and fewer crimes, especially murders and political malfeasances. It wanted and had its own institutions: dozens of theaters through the decades, the Brooklyn Institute, which would become the reputable Brooklyn Museum, the Leopold Eidlitz-designed Academy of Music, the first two enclosed baseball grounds in America, and, completed in 1873, a great Vaux and Olmsted park painfully planned and financed to match, or surpass, the one they had built in the middle of Manhattan Island in the previous decades.

At the same time it was plagued by the thousand miseries of runaway growth, with symptoms not so different from those of wicked New York. It was enormously hard, and not growing easier, to manage its expansion—to pave its streets, fill its water-pipes, instruct its children. And of course there was corruption; of course there was squalor and poverty and violent crime. Its exalted Protestant clergy and Republican politicians may have conceived of Brooklyn as an Anglo-Saxon New Englandite city, but in fact about half of its people were foreign-born, most of those Irish and Germans⁸⁵ who had transported and probably aggravated their cultural tendency to drink hard, most notoriously on Sundays. And the papers were filled with tales of drunkenness inclining to mayhem, often involving husbands and wives. One of the city's most newsworthy crimes was the operation of those tax-dodging distilleries in the Irish Fifth Ward, an industry that became so vigorous that from 1869 to the mid-1870s U.S. revenue officials enlisted federal forces, including Marines, in a series of invasions that became known as Brooklyn's "Whisky War," for they were stoutly resisted by the moonshiners and brick-and-stone-flinging residents of the district. One raid, in 1870, deployed 1500 troops.⁸⁶

Brooklyn's distinguished Americans included an impressive contingent of Civil War generals, such as James Jourdan, president of the Board of Police and Excise, Congressman Henry Slocum, Judge Calvin Pratt and a pair of legal bigwigs, the brothers-in-law Benjamin F. Tracy and Isaac Catlin, who would each defend a suspected Brooklyn murderess in the 1870s. Another alleged female assassin would