

DRINKS WITH DEAD PEOPLE

QUARANTINE EDITION

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[HARRY HILL](#)

Harry Hill ran the hottest club in 19th century New York: a multi-purpose bar, concert hall, fight venue and gambling house at Houston and Crosby Streets. He was a character.

THE STORY

Hill was a colorful Brit whose combination of brawn, acuity and street-smarts gained him broad respect and local notoriety: he entertained a rough crowd but strictly enforced house rules about behavior and relative quietude. Not only was he cool as a cucumber, Harry Hill had a reputation for being the sort of guy that gangsters could count on not to take sides, and drunks trusted with their gambling money because they knew he'd hand it all back after they sobered up.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the New York police were no fans of Hill's, and frequently visited his venue to try and get him on some charge, anything at all – liquor licensing under the excise law, fight certification, his “waiter girls,” or just plain police graft – and this was as much to pester Hill into forced obsolescence as to actually get a charge to stick, since there was no guarantee of the latter. In October 1886, for example, Hill was dragged into court on the charge that he had staged a boxing match and thereby given a “theatrical exhibition without having a license.” Hill calmly replied to the judge that, the 150 men in his bar being particularly bored that day, two offered to box to break the monotony, and the crowd, well, being decent men they all put up \$5 for each of the volunteers for their trouble. Hill's counsel explained that the fight was merely “an exhibition of athletic exercise,” and that if Hill could be arrested for that, well, every gym owner in New York could be convicted. *The New York Times* reported that on those words, “Hill was discharged, and left the court room with a smile on his face.”

Read on [at the blog](#) for more detail and resources.

DISCUSS:

True-crime stories became popular in the rising “penny press” and in magazines at this time.

Why do you think this is?

No one's in the clear here: Hill on his rule-bending and the cops on their protection racket. Who's worse?

Why do you think Hill's managed to consistently attract both high- and lower-class crowds?

Hi, I'm Betsy. Stuck at home? Let's learn history together, because the past helps us to understand that we are not alone. Weekday updates during #COVID19.

Questions? Comments? Say hello.

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READ MORE:

David Favaloro, “[Beer and Morality in the 19th Century](#),” *Tenement Museum*

Edward van Every, [Sins of New York as “exposed” by the Police](#) *Gazette* (1930)

Primary source: “[‘Arry ‘Ill](#),” *The Daily Commonwealth*, November 17, 1869

Primary source: “[A Female Boxing Match](#),” *The New York Times*, March 17, 1876