

## Championship in Kenner

New Orleans has played a significant role in its contribution to the history of the sport of boxing, especially in its early years. Figuring prominently in that history were three John L. Sullivan fights. On February 6, 1882, Sullivan and Paddy Ryan arrived in New Orleans for a bare-knuckle championship match-up. Governor Lowry of Mississippi tried to stop the contest, which was illegal, but it was fought in Mississippi City on the Mississippi Gulf Coast in a grove of live oaks. Sullivan was the victor, and it was the final time the championship would be won (as opposed to defended) in a bare-knuckle fight.

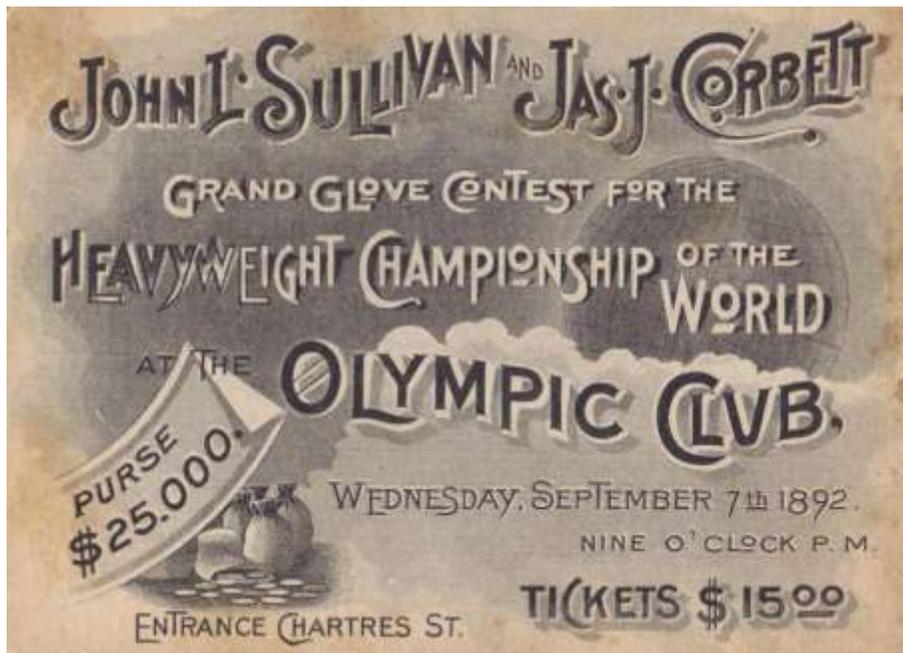


*"Boston Strong Boy, John L. Sullivan vs. "Gentleman Jim" Corbett*

The John L. Sullivan – Jake Kilrain fight on July 8, 1889, was one that Sullivan defended and won. It was the last world title bout fought under the London Prize Ring Rules, or – in other words – the last bare-knuckle heavyweight title bout. Since Governor Francis T. Nicholls of Louisiana had forbidden the fight in the state, special trains left New

Orleans for the secret location, which turned out to be Richburg, a town just south of Hattiesburg, Mississippi. It was one of the first sporting events in the United States to receive extensive national press coverage. A good deal of the pre-fight coverage speculated on just where the bout would take place.

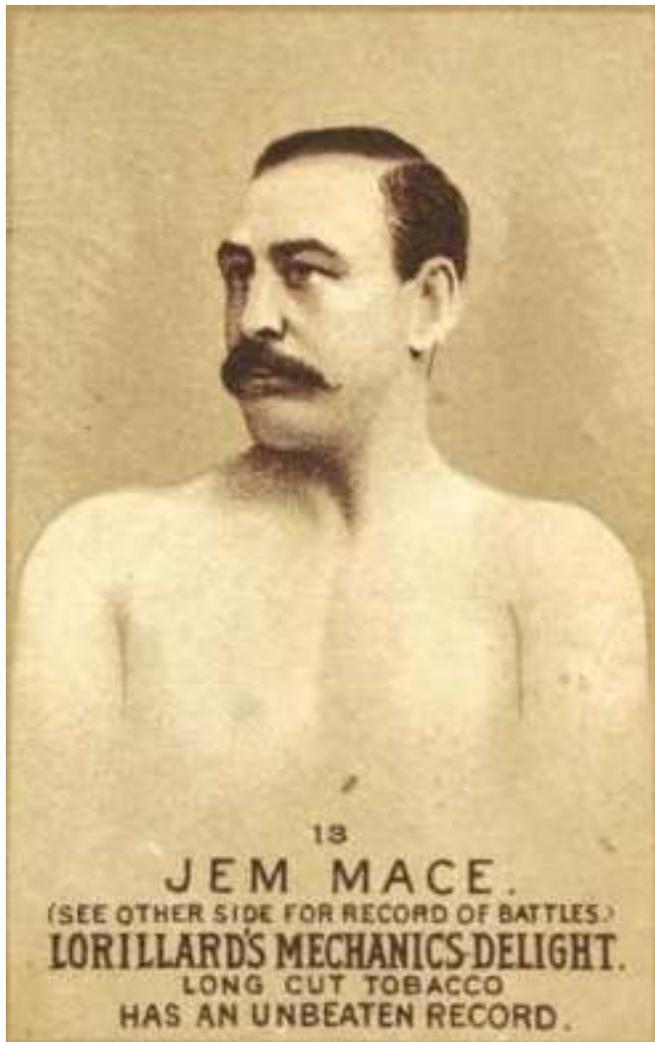
And the first world heavyweight championship bout under the Marquess of Queensberry Rules was Sullivan vs. "Gentleman Jim" Corbett, who defeated Sullivan on September 7, 1892, at the Olympic Club in what is today known as the New Orleans Bywater.



*Ad for Sullivan and Corbett's "Battle in the Bywater"*

Depending on modern boxing authority, John L. Sullivan was first considered World Heavyweight Champion either in 1888 when he defeated Charley Mitchell in France, or in 1889 when Jake Kilrain threw in the towel in round 75 of their grueling 80-round scheduled bout.

But there are others who argue that the first actual World Heavyweight Champion was Jem Mace, who defeated Tom Allen on May 10, 1870, at Oakland Plantation in Kenner, Louisiana. At the time, potent anti-British sentiment within the mostly Irish-American boxing community chose to disregard his important accomplishment.



*Jem Mace (1831 – 1910)*

James "Jem" Mace was born April 8, 1831, the fifth of eight children, in the remote village of Beeston-next-Mileham in rural Norfolk, England. Although nicknamed "The Gypsy", in a later autobiography, Mace denied his Romani ethnicity. He was nicknamed the "Swaffham Gypsy" (from a town near his home village) at the time of his first appearance as a prize fighter. The "Gypsy" connection was probably due to the fact that his uncle, Barney Mace, was married to Lurena Baker, the teenage daughter of a well-known Romani family. The couple's eldest son, Pooley Mace, was the close friend and lifelong companion of his cousin Jem.

Mace made his debut in 1857 and, in 1861, won the title of Champion of England by defeating Sam Hurst at Medway Island, Kent. He successfully defended his title in 1862 against Tom King, who defeated Jem later that year. King retired and Mace was once again recognized as champion in 1866, having defeated Joe Goss at Purfleet, Essex.

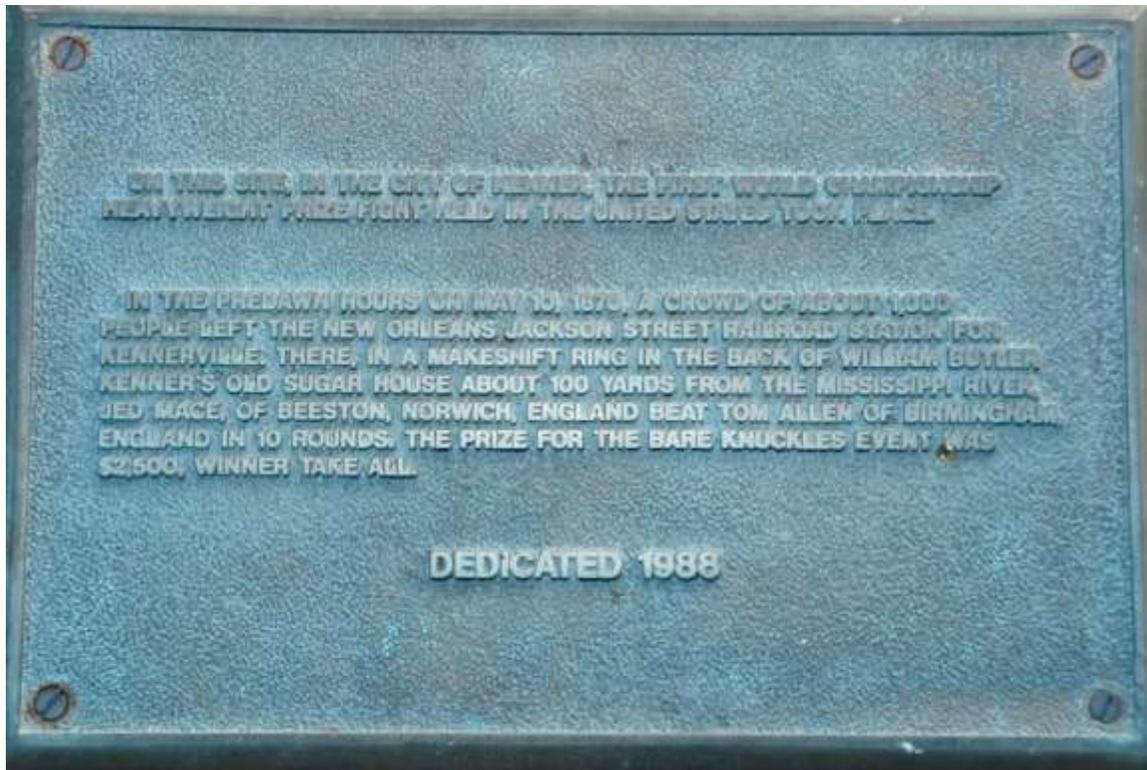
A middleweight, Jem was not your ordinary boxer. He was an adept violinist who originally aspired to a musical career. When three thugs destroyed his musical instrument, it is said that his subsequent thrashing of these ruffians led to a career in the ring. As a fighter, he was successful in outboxing much heavier opponents thanks to his clever defensive tactics, dancing style and punishing, accurate punching.



*Monument to the Jem Mace – Tom Allen fight in Kenner*

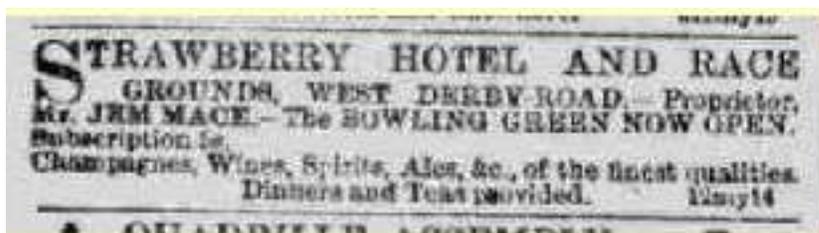
In the years 1866 to 1867, Jem had an affair with the multi-talented New Orleans-born American actress Adah Isaacs Menken. Appearing in London and Birmingham theatres at the time, she was the international sex symbol of her day. She scandalized Victorian audiences with her performance in the melodrama *Mazeppa*, riding on stage, seemingly naked, tied face-up on the back of a horse. She had multiple marriages and was a notoriously free sexual spirit. Jem had

no trouble keeping up with Adah, having married three times himself, twice bigamously. He fathered at least fourteen children by five different women: a lover *and* a fighter! Not in these days and times.



*Plaque honoring "The First World Championship Heavyweight Fight" About 1,000 fight fans "left the Jackson Street Railroad Station for Kennerville" in "the predawn hours" of May 10, 1870. The plaque, dedicated 1888, has Jem's name misspelled: "Jed Mace".*

Also in 1866, Jem Mace became the proprietor of the Strawberry Gardens pleasure grounds at West Derby, near Liverpool.



Jem worked at various times in circuses, was a racehorse owner and pub proprietor. He operated a saloon in New York City for a number of years, the Capitol Saloon on Twenty-Third Street in Manhattan, which was frequented by a steady stream of notorious underworld criminals

and Tammany Hall politicians. Years later, Jem Mace later ran a hotel in Melbourne, Australia. He left his mark all over the world.

Oakland Plantation in Kenner was once owned by William Butler Kenner (1810 - 1853), who died of yellow fever at age 43, along with his 12-year-old son. In 1855, the city of Kenner, Louisiana, was founded by Minor Kenner on land that consisted of three plantation properties that had been owned by the Kenner family. Oakland was one of those three plantations. A monument to the Jem Mace – Tom Allen fight can be found near the river end of Williams Boulevard. The makeshift ring was located in the rear of William Butler Kenner's old sugarhouse, which was located about 100 yards from the river. The two pugilists fought for ten rounds and 44 minutes. Jem Mace defended his title twice against American fighter Joe Coburn in 1871, securing a draw on both occasions. However, on April 6, 1871, Mace suffered a loss in New Orleans to "Gentleman" José Alonso.

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**✓** "The sporting fraternity of our city are in very high glee, in consequence of the receipt of a telegram from Memphis last night, announcing the fact that Jem Mace, the famous pugilist, accompanied by his trainer and John C. Heenan, had left Memphis for this city.

Mace, upon his arrival here, will go into training at some point near the city for his great match with Tom Allen, which is to take place, according to settled arrangements, on the 10th of May next, within fifty miles of New Orleans.

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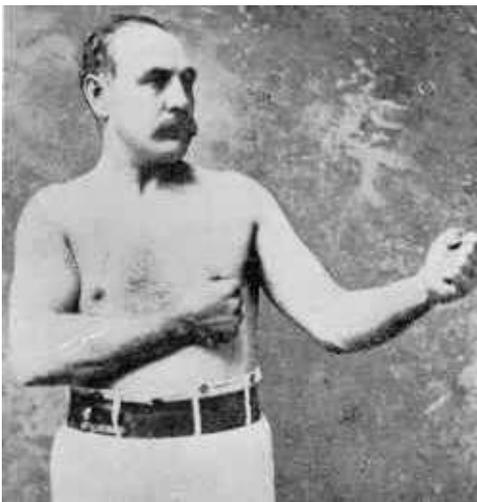
*Sneak preview of the Mace – Allen fight in the Picayune, April 1, 1870*

Jem Mace was one of the fighters who fought under the Marquess of Queensberry rules, first drafted in London in 1865 and published in 1867, which were the first to mandate the use of gloves in boxing. Under these new rules, Mace defeated Bill Davis at Virginia City, Nevada, in 1876. From 1877 to 1882 his exhibition fights in Australia

laid the groundwork for the worldwide acceptance of glove boxing. In 1882, Mace toured New Zealand where he was responsible for discovering future Heavyweight Champion of the World, Bob Fitzsimmons. In 1896, World Heavyweight Champion James J. Corbett acclaimed Jem Mace as "the man to whom we owe the changes that have elevated the sport".



*Oakland Plantation Estates in Kenner*



*Jem Mace in a boxing pose*

Jem Mace, the reader may be interested to know, has a Beatles connection. No, "Strawberry Field Forever" did not come from Mace's "Strawberry Gardens" and Hotel. As Mace became well-known as the British fighting champion, he supplemented his income by working in

various Victorian traveling circuses, even becoming a circus proprietor himself for a short period. He is perhaps best remembered for his tour through Lancashire with Pablo Fanque's Circus Royal in the late summer and autumn of 1861 — Fanque being an English equestrian and the country's first black circus proprietor, later immortalized in the Beatles song "Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite!" in their album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967). The Mr. Kite (mentioned in the poster below) is believed to be William Kite, formerly of "Wells's Circus", who was in the employ of Pablo Fanque from 1843 to 1845.



*Pablo Fanque's poster, the inspiration for the Beatles song*

Pablo Fanque (nee William Darby March 30, 1810, in Norwich, England; died May 4, 1871, in Stockport, England) owned a circus that

was the most popular in Victorian Britain for thirty years, a period that is regarded as the golden age of the circus.



*Pablo Fanque, famous Victorian circus proprietor*

Jem Mace is listed as having the longest professional career of any fighter in prizefighting history. He spent more than thirty-five years in the ring, well into his 60s, and recorded his last exhibition bout in 1909 in his late 70s. He died November 30, 1910.

During his lifetime, the pugnacious, yet multi-talented, Jem Mace made and gambled away quite a considerable fortune. At the end of seventy-nine-year life, he was a penniless busker in Jarrow, Durham, England, and was buried in an unmarked grave at Anfield Cemetery, at Liverpool.

In 1954, *Ring Magazine* established a Hall of Fame, whose members mostly converted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame, which inducted Mace #34 in 1990. He was a 2014 Inductee for the Australian Boxing Hall of Fame in the International category.

In 2002, the Merseyside Former Boxers Association arranged a memorial tombstone by his grave, and there is also a commemorative plaque in the center of Norwich, England. Largely forgotten, however, is the impressive bronze monument in Kenner, Louisiana, erected in honor of the man considered by many to be the First Heavyweight Boxing Champion of the World.



*Jem Mace, 1907*

## **NED HÉMARD**

New Orleans Nostalgia  
"Championship in Kenner"  
Ned Hémard  
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