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A Puzzling Death at the Mysterious Fulton Chess Club

by Olimpiu G. Urcan

At the end of the 19th century, New York could take great pride in having some of the strongest and most active chess clubs in the world. The Manhattan Chess Club and the New York City Chess Club were regularly visited by renowned European chess masters, and such occasions were celebrated with various sorts of exhibitions for their many members. Yet, it wasn't only in such respectable places that chess was played by affluent gentlemen after a day's work. A certain Fulton Chess Club briefly existed in the very heart of New York in the year of 1898, with rumors of gambling and perhaps even murder.



Charles F. Barker
The Olean Democrat, March 29, 1895

The owner of this obscure club was Charles Barker, his club led a silent and untroubled existence in Room 6 of the building at 122 Fulton Street, and he liked it this way. Yet, this tranquil atmosphere was shaken by the sudden death of George Stanfield, the 51-year-old wealthy owner of the Victoria Hotel, on Thursday afternoon of October 27, 1898. [\[1\]](#)

A police investigation ensued, encouraged by earlier suspicions that the establishment was not a genuine chess club, but rather a poolroom. "A Chess Club in the heart of the busiest section of New York, open between 10 A.M. and 6 P.M., may seem rather odd to the devotees of the silent game, who generally find pleasure in playing it in their homes, and at their clubs after the cares and troubles of the day are over," a reporter wrote in the *New York Times* of October 29, 1898.

“The idea of New York businessmen in the Wall Street section, running out of their offices ‘for a game of chess,’ may appear to have something of a comic-opera touch.”

It seems that Stanfield left his home at around 1:00 on the day of his unfortunate demise, and reached the Fulton Chess Club at 2:30 in the afternoon. He was talking to Barker when “he became faint, and sunk into a chair.” Barker sent a man to go and get Dr. W. H. Farrington at the Astor House, but Stanfield was deceased upon the doctor’s arrival. The cause of death, according to a Doctor of the Coroner’s Service, was heart disease. Apparently, Barker did not report the death to the police as quickly as possible, nor did he wait for the police to arrive before removing the body. This caused investigations by the Metropolitan Police and by individual journalists.

A reporter for the *New York Times* visited the club, but found a “vacant place.” He talked with William Cox, the elevator boy, who declared that the club had only been open for half an hour the day before, and that there were no members in attendance, or such members were unknown to him. The *Times* man then questioned Captain Smith, the officer in charge of the Old Slip Police Station:

“Did you ever hear of this Club, before Mr. Stanfield died?”

“Yes, I have.”

“Is it true that the place is a poolroom?”

“It is my belief that it is not a poolroom.”

“Did you ever investigate it?”

“I have investigated it a dozen times,” said Capt. Smith, “and on the orders of Chief Devery. It has been running for some months, and some time ago a report came to the Police Headquarters, stating that the Club was a poolroom. I was ordered to keep a strict watch on it, and for days I had officers, both in uniform and citizens’ dress watch the rooms, and my instructions were to watch them closely. I told them to make written statements to me and each of these statements say that the officers could not find ‘any violation of the law.’ At least a dozen different officers made the same statements, which I can produce.”

However, Barker could not be found at his rented rooms on Second Avenue, and, according to the landlady, he had moved some time ago to an unknown destination on Long Island. So police detectives continued to monitor the building at 122 Fulton Street until one of them encountered him; a dialogue between the two was published in the *New York Times* report, which reads as follows:

“I am sorry. There is no mystery about it,” he said. “The gentleman died suddenly from natural causes I suppose, and I can assure you that no one regrets it more than I do. I don’t want anything in the papers if I can help it. Mr. Stanfield was in my office for fifteen minutes. He was talking to me when he became very pale. He sank in a chair as a friend of his came in, and with this man’s aid, I have laid Mr. Stanfield on a lounge. I sent a man for a doctor, but Stanfield died in a minute or two. That’s all.”

“How many members has the Fulton Chess Club?” Barker was asked.

“It has a fair membership. I will give no names. I do not care to drag other gentlemen into this affair. I can see no sense in all the fuss that is being made over it.”

“Is any betting on horse races done at the Fulton Club?”

“No.”

“Isn’t it an odd thing for a chess club to be established in the busiest part of the city? Chess is usually played by men when they have lots of time to spare.”

“I suppose men can play chess when they like.”

“Has your club any by-laws, rules or regulations?”

“Such things are unnecessary.”

“Is it true that it is used for pool selling, or some other form of gambling, and not for chess?”

“It is not true.”

Then Barker departed, declaring himself bothered by such questions and not willing to answer them anymore. However, William Cox, upon further questioning, gave essential details about the club's activity that could not have been unearthed otherwise. He stated that he had often seen men going inside the club, but that he did not know the exact nature of their business. He reported that "frequently he had seen drinks going up to the club from the café, but he was sure the club had no attendants." He also revealed that a door, on which "No Admittance" was painted, led to an apparent secret room, which some gentlemen entered freely. "No one has been found in the second room of the Fulton Chess Club, adjoining the room where Mr. Stanfield died," the *New York Times* report concluded.

Meanwhile, Dr. Farrington declared that he had not seen any poolroom; all that he had seen was Barker's main office, and all his attention rested with the deceased. A police Captain, who kept the place under surveillance for months, reported that he had received many warnings about the so-called chess club being a poolroom, but he could not find any evidence of it. He made a visit and interviewed the occupants of the neighbouring rooms, but it led to naught. Everyone declared that the place was very quiet, caused no disturbances, and thus attracted no attention.

American police forces of that era led a constant war against such clandestine poolrooms and gambling places. The successive prohibition laws did not eliminate gambling; they simply drove it underground to places the police could not easily access.^[2] At the end of March 1898, policemen raided the Allen's West Side Club on 80 Sixth Avenue, which was owned by a famous criminal family. They battered down the doors of the club using Fire Department axes, arrested almost 200 men, had the Club's rooms closed, and launched a full-scale investigation.

The low profile of the quiet Fulton Chess Club was not enough to deter suspicion, and the death of Stanfield gave the detectives an excuse to actually search the place. Yet, nothing was found to incriminate the owner or the members of this mysterious chess club.



Clarence H. Freeman
The Olean Democrat, March 29, 1895

A reasonable question for a chess historian is to determine the exact identity of Charles Barker. For there was a checkers player named Charles F. Barker, ^[3] who is reputed to have been one of the inside operators of the automaton Ajeeb in the second decade of the 20th century, when the

automaton favored checkers more than chess. Charles F. Barker was also the American National Checkers Champion in various decades, who won a high-profile match played in 1890 in New York against Clarence Freeman, a Pequot Indian, with a remarkable gift for brilliancy at checkers. [\[4\]](#)

Other questions are impossible to answer with a great deal of certainty. What was the actual cause of Stanfield's death? Was the Fulton Chess Club actually an underground gambling parlor? Were there other questionable activities taking place? Or was it simply a quiet spot where influential businessmen escaped from the worries of a busy New York? Had Hercule Poirot found himself in Gotham in the late autumn of 1898, this case certainly would have challenged his utmost skills.

Footnotes

[1] The details of the story are taken from a journalistic investigation, the results of which were published in the *New York Times* of October 29, 1898.

[2] In Albany, for instance, in February 1900, Assemblyman Saunders introduced a bill that made it a misdemeanor for any telegraph or telephone company to transmit to any poolroom or bucketshop the result of any horse race. Under the provisions of this act, a second offence was deemed a felony, punishable by a fine or imprisonment or both.

[3] C.F. Barker authored *The American Checker Player: Comprising Twenty-Two Openings, with 534 variations of the best analyzed play* (De Wolfe, Fiske, & Co, Boston, 1880). He also had a brother, W. R. Barker, who was a prodigy at checkers in the late 1870's. It was a strong American tradition to have chess and checkers played on the premises of the same club (and at times Whist). Thus players such as Morphy and Pillsbury performed well at both of these "allied pastimes."

[4] The *New York Times* of September 14, 1890 reported: "Clarence Freeman is of Indian and African blood. He is intelligent and modest in demeanor, and his only offence in appearance is a somewhat too lavish display of jewelry. He is employed as factotum and collector by a local restaurateur, but he must eat, drink, and sleep checkers, for he has nearly all book play in his head (...)"

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