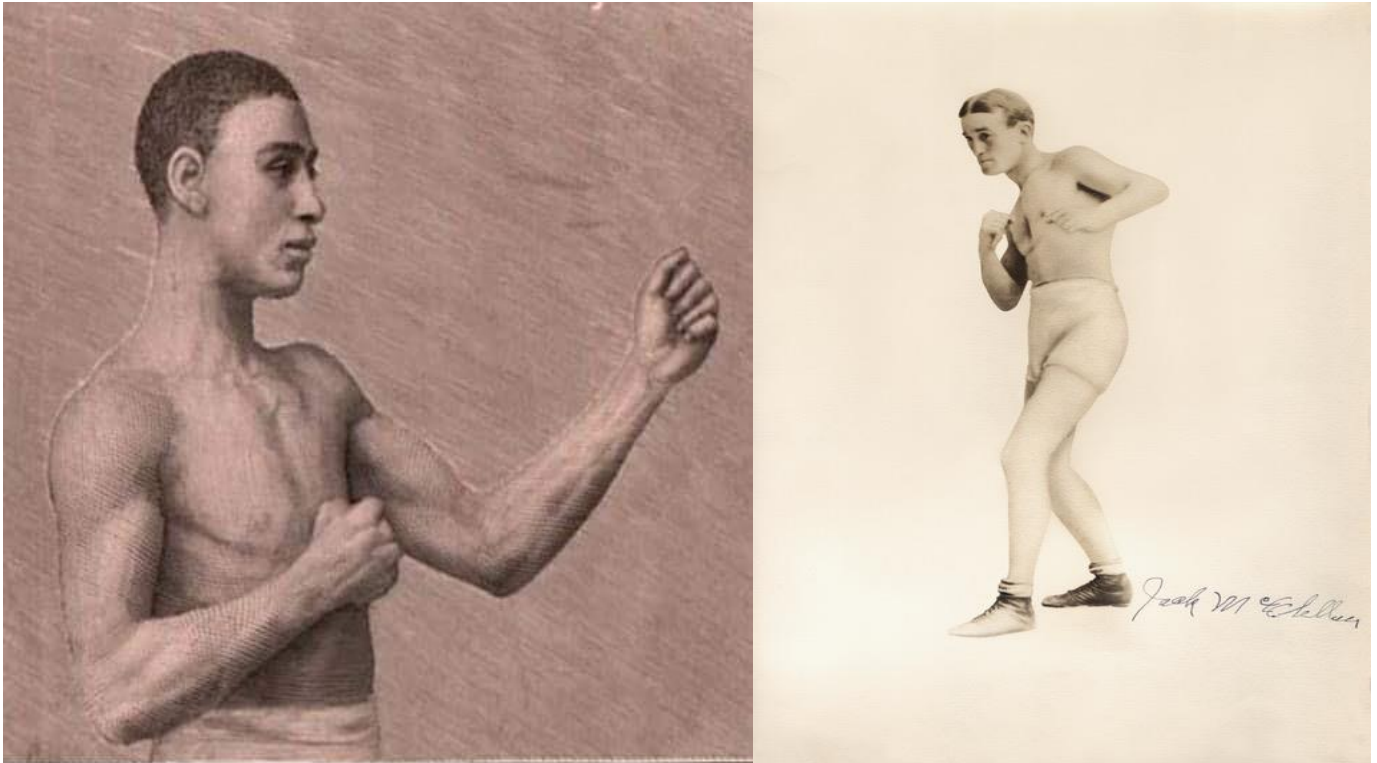


'T WAS THE FIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS



Jimmy Reeder VS Jack McClelland

December 24, 1903

Christmas Eve, a time for family and friends. A time of quiet self-reflection on the passing of a year well lived. A time where children dream of the wonders they will find under the tree the following morning. A time of... broken bones and six rounds of mitt-sliding?

While most people gathered to celebrate the season, boxing fans from Southwestern Pennsylvania converged upon the town of Greensburg to watch two of the best featherweights in the state duke it out on this most holiest of nights.

On December 24, 1903, the Keaggy Theater in Greensburg, Pennsylvania played host to a number of bouts, including the main event between Jimmy Reeder of Altoona (fighting out of Youngwood at this time), Pennsylvania and Jack McClelland known as the "Pride

of Pittsburg,” with part of the gate receipts going to benefit a sick baseball player from the Greensburg baseball team who was hospitalized, although the name of the player does not appear in any of the sources. The forecast that night called for cloudiness and rain, which would allow fight fans to attend the event without fear of being snowbound. All was set for a night of jabs, uppercuts, and knockouts. Peace on Earth was not to be found inside the squared circle that evening.



*The Keaggy Theater

Greensburg, PA

While Reeder and McClelland had not previously traded blows, there is no doubt that both pugilists were familiar with each other’s handy work. Both had fought greats like Squirrel Finnerty, Joe Bernstein, and Eddie Gardner leading up to this Christmas Eve clash. Both fighters were in their prime and both were ready to show the other that it

wouldn't be a Merry Christmas after all. Reeder, who had been coming off a period of inactivity due to rheumatism, told the *Pittsburg Post* just days before the fight that "he was ready to give Jack a beautiful Christmas present."

McClelland on the other hand had just come off a TKO victory (or no decision, depending on the source) over George Engle at Turner Hall in Pittsburgh's East End on Dec 23. McClelland was scheduled to fight at a private event on Christmas Day which would make three fights back-to-back over three days. Both fighters met at catchweight. The stage was all set for a Christmas Eve dustup.

As night fell over the Keaggy Theater, three preliminary bouts and an appearance by the Clinton Twins (sibling boxers who would often put on exhibitions in the area) warmed up the crowd. Jimmy McGovern took on Jack Flynn, Jim Ferns met Harry Brown, and Jimmy Welsh mixed it up with Tom Regan rounding out the card before the main event.

Sadly, there isn't a round-by-round writeup of the fight between Reeder and McClelland. The December 26th issue of the *Pittsburg Press* stated that:

"Jack McClelland easily defeated Jimmy Reeder Thursday night in six rounds."

The paper also reported that McClelland broke his left hand in the first round but kept it a secret from everyone except for his manager until the fight was over when two local doctors were called in to set the break. This injury would cause McClelland to postpone a fight he had scheduled with "The Fighting Marine" Jimmy Hanlon for a week (the fight eventually took place on January 14, 1904). Details about the private fight McClelland had scheduled for Christmas Day are unknown. The author of this article has McClelland's private papers, and the fight is not listed, leading one to assume that it did not take place, though that cannot be completely verified.

Reeder went back to his former hometown of Altoona and stayed at the Windsor Hotel for a few days. The December 26th issue of the *Altoona Mirror* quoted Reeder as saying:

"McClellan [sic] is not the man he is cracked up to be by the Pittsburg papers and if he had been in condition to fight when he met him in Greensburg McClellan [sic] would have been an easy victim."

Reeder and McClelland would face each other again at the Bellevue Club in Altoona on August 11, 1905, with McClelland gaining a newspaper decision in the *Pittsburg Press* and the *Altoona Times* with the *Pittsburg Post* giving a "no decision."

So, this year, when you are sitting down with your family and friends, take a moment to think about how different life was 121 years ago when on Christmas Eve, two fighters duked it out in front of a roaring crowd all in the name of charity. If that doesn't capture the Spirit of the Season, I don't know what does.

The author would like to thank and acknowledge the Estate of Dr. William McClelland and Lisa McClelland for the usage of the photo of Jack McClelland. The author would also like to thank Douglas Cavanaugh for providing the picture of Jimmy Reeder.