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THE BAWDY BLUFF: PROSTITUTION IN MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE, 1820-1900

A Dissertation  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Department of History  
The University of Mississippi

by  
A. Tyson Smith  
May, 2016

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## ABSTRACT

The “Bawdy Bluff” is a study of prostitution in Memphis, Tennessee, between the city’s founding and the end of the nineteenth century. Its focus is on the relationship of prostitutes to the wider community as well as their lived experience. The bulk of scholarship on prostitution in nineteenth century America examines Northeastern cities and Western mining camps. Outside of New Orleans, there is a dearth of research into prostitution in the urban South. This dissertation seeks to correct this oversight. By examining prostitution through the lenses of race, class, and gender, the “Bawdy Bluff” illuminates the ways power operated in Memphis.

Chapter One traces the rise of prostitution in Memphis from the city’s founding to the eve of the Civil War. During this period, Memphians attempted to drive prostitutes from town through vigilante action. By the late 1850s, merchants, city officials, and the police began to make common cause with prostitutes, thus ensuring brothels would remain a fixture of the city’s landscape.

Chapter Two addresses the Civil War, a time when prostitution expanded rapidly. The primary focus of this chapter is on the ways in which military authorities regulated prostitution. The Union military’s program of regulation failed to stop the spread of venereal disease or improve the lives of prostitutes. The end of the war lifted pro-prostitution merchants into political power, ensuring prostitution would grow over the coming decade.

Chapter three addresses the lives of prostitutes and is divided into four sections: the prostitution of children, interactions with reformers, relationships, and health. The intent is to present the multivalent and often contradictory experiences of women in the sex trade. Many women entered prostitution through coercion or lack of resources, but others embraced it for the excitement and participation in youth culture it promised.

The final chapter discusses madams and the business of prostitution. Memphis madams are popularly remembered as martyrs or ostentatiously bejeweled women of wealth. My intent in this chapter is to challenge these notions and present madams as entrepreneurial figures who possessed business acumen and managerial skills.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my little black rainclouds, Janine and Ethel. I also dedicate this to my parents, who fostered in me a love of history from an early age and provided encouragement during the process of research and writing.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SCA Shelby County Archives

TSLA Tennessee State Library and Archives

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank professors Elizabeth Payne, Deirdre Cooper Owens, Anne Twitty, Chiarella Esposito, and Jeffrey Jackson for reading this dissertation and providing suggestions and editorial advice. I would also like to thank my colleagues for providing inspiration, sources, and feedback. Finally, I would like to offer a special salute to my friends and colleagues Kyle and Katherine Blank, who provided a much-needed periodic catharsis throughout the process of writing this dissertation.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	ii
DEDICATION .....	iv
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS .....	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	vi
LIST OF TABLES .....	viii
INTRODUCTION .....	1
HISTORIOGRAPHY .....	12
METHODOLOGY AND TERMINOLOGY .....	30
CHAPTER ONE .....	37
CHAPTER TWO .....	109
CHAPTER THREE .....	183
CHAPTER FOUR .....	271
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	359
VITA .....	375

LIST OF TABLES

1. Origins of Madams, 1860-1900 .....280

2. Supporters and Opponents of Prostitution in Memphis: 1857-1900 .....296

“The best job that was ever offered to me was to become a landlord in a brothel. In my opinion it’s the perfect milieu for an artist to work in. It gives him perfect economic freedom; he’s free of fear and hunger; he has a roof over his head and nothing whatever to do except keep a few simple accounts and to go once every month and pay off the local police. The place is quiet during the morning hours, which is the best time of the day to work. There’s enough social life in the evening, if he wishes to participate, to keep him from being bored; it gives him a certain standing in his society; he has nothing to do because the madam keeps the books; all the inmates of the house are females and would defer to him and call him 'sir.' All the bootleggers in the neighborhood would call him 'sir.' And he could call the police by their first names.”<sup>1</sup> - William Faulkner

## INTRODUCTION

This is a study of prostitution in Memphis between 1819 and 1900. Its focus is on the lives of sex workers and their relationship to the wider community. Memphis was often referred to as a “rough” river town lacking in the refinements of other eastern cities; a town built on cotton and vice. By examining the history of sex work through the lenses of race, class, and gender, this study sheds light on the decisive role of the sex trade in shaping the landscape, both physical and cultural, of Memphis. Despite stout resistance from cotton factors, wholesale merchants, and middle-class reformers, prostitution came to occupy a central place in the city's economy and culture. An alliance of sex workers, landlords, politicians, and small shopkeepers ensured Memphis remained a rough, rowdy city tied to pleasure.

The William Faulkner epigraph above encapsulates much of what this dissertation describes. When Faulkner wrote and spoke about brothels, he largely referred to those he had

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<sup>1</sup> Phillip Gourevitch, ed., *The Paris Review Interviews, II* (New York: Picador, 2007) 37-38.

encountered in Memphis. His novels are replete with references to Memphis houses of ill-fame, including *The Reivers*, *Sanctuary*, and *Requiem for a Nun*. Faulkner had spent time in the city's houses of ill-fame in the early twentieth century, stopping in with friends to socialize with the girls in the parlor, but probably never going upstairs as a customer. His conversations with prostitutes and madams formed the basis of a number of his stories. These conversations also gave him insight into how the sex trade worked in Memphis. Faulkner grasped the ways in which sex work was inextricably tied to the legitimate economy and power structure of the city; the rhythms of the parlorhouse with its quiet mornings when servants conducted housekeeping and prostitutes slept; and the respect accorded to the landlords of brothels, men who “had a certain standing” in society.<sup>2</sup>

As much as this brief quotation reveals about the sex trade in Memphis, it fails to capture the lives of sex workers themselves; the factors that brought women into the sex trade, the conditions they encountered, and the ways they were viewed by society. Faulkner viewed these “inmates” as deferential women – the manner in which customers preferred them to behave – but some prostitutes did not defer. Some Memphis prostitutes challenged a rising middle-class by attaining wealth without respectability and thrift. Others challenged white supremacy by providing interracial sex and aiding slaves. By congregating in public spaces, sex workers also challenged notions of respectability. But for most of these women, life remained harsh. Most did not attain economic independence, and struggled in a system that exploited them at practically every level.

Between 1857 and the beginning of the Civil War, prostitution exploded in Memphis. The sex trade became a booming industry after the completion of railroads linking Memphis to the

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<sup>2</sup> Joel Williamson, *William Faulkner and Southern History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 187, 387. According to Faulkner's friends, he never accompanied sex workers to their rooms.

rest of the country. The first of these, the Mississippi and Tennessee Railroad, connected Memphis to the hinterlands of Mississippi, and by 1861 connected Memphis to Jackson and other points South, including New Orleans. This road was joined by the Memphis and Charleston Railroad, the first rail line to connect the Atlantic seaboard to the Mississippi river. By the beginning of the Civil War, Memphis was connected to Jackson, Nashville, Charleston, New Orleans, and Louisville by rail. These rail links contributed to a dramatic increase in the economic activity of the city. Men flocked to Memphis in order to work in a market that promised higher wages, and with these came prostitutes. A small number of sex workers had always plied their trade in the river town from its settlement, but after 1857 matters changed drastically. The sudden influx of larger numbers of prostitutes into the city shocked residents. This swift growth posed difficulties for segregating respectable and disreputable elements in the city. Memphis failed to create safe spaces for respectable women and families. Houses of ill-fame lined the boulevards and drunken sex workers rumbled down the dirt avenues in open carriages.

The railroads and King Cotton had saved Memphis from decline into obscurity, but they had also let loose a steady stream of abandoned women who needed to be addressed by city authorities. In response, Memphis aldermen enacted a law licensing prostitutes in 1858, making it one of the first cities in the United States to regulate prostitution. The law, however, existed only briefly inasmuch as public backlash led to a swift repeal a month later. The distractions of preparations for war in 1861 interfered with the creation of an effective policy for dealing with the sex trade. This had serious implications for the future, as open prostitution spread into nearly every part of the city. During this period, Memphis did not have a “red light district.” Indeed, virtually all neighborhoods in the city had multiple brothels.

From the earliest appearance of prostitutes in their midst, Memphians divided over whether they should be allowed to remain. Some welcomed these women, notably petty merchants, landlords, politicians and lawyers. These groups joined forces with madams to form prostitution cliques which reaped profits from prostitution. Others reacted to the appearance of prostitutes with violence. Throughout 1858 and 1859, Memphians confronted the problem of the growing “social evil” with vigilante action. They burned brothels, attacked prostitutes, and attempted to drive them out of town. These “brothel bullies” objected to the presence of brothels in their neighborhoods, and in the absence of prompt police action, dealt with prostitutes through direct extralegal means. “Brothel bullies” came from all sectors of Memphis society: river transients, laborers, upwardly mobile members of the working class, white collar workers and wealthy suburbanite manufacturers. Working class men objected to brothels for a number of reasons, including resentment of “independent” women making more money on average than they did during a week. White collar workers who embraced bourgeois notions of self-control and public morality objected to prostitutes driving down property values and enticing their sons and daughters into a dissolute life. Suburbanites who operated small manufacturing concerns believed brothels threatened the domestic tranquility of their homes and harmed labor discipline. In response to the outpouring of violence, city politicians, many of whom were landlords, merchants and attorneys, offered police protection to brothels. This official corruption ensured that organized prostitution would grow and develop deep roots in the coming decades.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, progressive merchants, evangelicals, middle-class reformers, and elite

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<sup>3</sup> *Timothy Gilfoyle, City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), 76-91; *Memphis Daily Appeal*, December 28, 1858, Memphis Recorder Docket, SCA, Memphis Police Blotter, 1858-1860, SCA; Professions and ages are taken from 1860 U.S. Federal Census, Memphis, Shelby County Tennessee, and Rainey, *1855-1856 Memphis Directory*, Tanner, *1859 Memphis Directory; Appeal, June 11, 1858*; Professions of brothel rioters and taken from Rainey, *1855-1856 Memphis Directory*, Tanner, *1859 Memphis Directory*, 1860 U.S. Census, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee; 1858 Rucker Map of Memphis, SCA.

wholesale merchants struggled in vain to enforce their vision of an orderly, purified, public sphere. With allies in the police force and city government, prostitutes could no longer be driven from the city by force; instead, middle-class reformers turned to changing the culture of the streets by feminizing the public sphere into a place for respectable women to shop, socialize, and attend the theater. Responding to changes in women's roles, proprietors of department stores and restaurants sought to draw more women into their businesses by advertising directly to women as consumers or by establishing eateries that could be visited by families. Theaters, traditionally the preserve of rowdy men, began exhibiting morally elevating entertainments geared toward women. In Memphis this proved a task fraught with difficulty, particularly when prostitutes thronged the streets, often in costumes no different from those worn by respectable women. Evangelicals and anxious patriarchs worried over the spiritual state of young men as well. Ministers preached sermons on the evils of the city and fathers called for the establishment of a public library to draw young men away from the pleasures of the saloons and brothels.

The onset of the Civil War greatly expanded the scale of the sex trade in Memphis. The Civil War transformed Memphis into one of the great centers of prostitution in the country in the 1860s. Army encampments, both Confederate and Union, became a lucrative market for sex workers. While it certainly never reached the level of New York, New Orleans or Washington D.C., which housed thousands of prostitutes, statistics suggest that Memphis had more prostitutes per capita than even the Confederate capitol, a city with a larger population. "Too broad to be bound by political creeds," Memphis prostitutes' loyalties shifted with the allegiance of their customers.

Union occupation proved most decisive in expanding and entrenching the sex trade in Memphis. After a system of licensing met with success in Nashville, the Union Provost Marshal

adopted a similar system to regulate the cyprians of Memphis. Those who supported this measure intended to protect respectable women by removing sex workers from the streets, arrest the spread of venereal disease, and also promoting military discipline in the occupied city. Scholars have overstated the success of this program. Primarily created to shield respectable white women by removing sex workers from public spaces, the laws did not apply to black prostitutes. They also failed to protect prostitutes from the violence of soldiers and other men and did nothing to address the underlying causes of prostitution. Union authorities encouraged poor refugee women to adopt prostitution to support themselves rather than distribute aid.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, the war years proved a boon to some sex workers. Prostitution grew and became more entrenched throughout the late 1860s and early 1870s. This occurred in part because of a revolution in city politics. Petit bourgeois shopkeepers and saloon operators replaced the old guard of the city's economic elite who had largely been hostile to prostitution. This latter class fostered and protected prostitution. Prostitutes formed partnerships – business and personal – with local merchants and police, which provided monetary as well as social benefits. The alliances among prostitutes, local merchants, landlords and police meant that prostitution remained highly visible along the busiest thoroughfares and in residential areas.irate citizens petitioned authorities to abate brothels, but to no avail.

Following the Civil War, Memphis developed an open sexual culture in which prostitutes picnicked in the city parks and attended balls at the Exposition Building; Memphians visited theaters to see the Can-Can and lines of barouches parked on Court Square – a space intended as a respectable resort for elite women and their families – rang with the laughter of high-class

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<sup>4</sup> E. Susan Barber, “Depraved and Abandoned Women: Prostitution in Richmond, Virginia, Across the Civil War,” in Susanna Defino and Michele Gillespie, eds., *Neither Lady Nor Slave: Working Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 155-173; *Avalanche*, June 25, 1862.



courtesans. Resorts of prostitution flourished in nearly every ward of the city and the personal lives of sex workers became the subject of newspaper articles.<sup>5</sup>

The end of the Civil War also led to an increase in prostitution by newly emancipated women of color. Prior to the war, free women of color made up only a small percentage of the sex workers in Memphis. But during and following the war, the number of black sex workers increased. Women of color made up one quarter of Memphis prostitutes in 1870. Many of these women had been drawn to prostitution for the same reasons their white counterparts had: to survive. Others entered upon a life of sex work for the freedom, pleasures, and participation in urban amusements it promised. The growing numbers of black prostitutes led to integrated brothels, a development which outraged many. Newly emancipated black hackmen worked as the chauffeurs of brothels, carrying cyprians about town in open barouches, from which the women advertised their services.<sup>6</sup>

While prostitution held out the promise of wealth and comfort, it seldom delivered. The most successful madams wore fine jewelry and clothes, consumed expensive champagne, and lived a life of relative ease. Many women embraced prostitution for the life of pleasure it promised. Ambitious sex workers sought to climb the sex worker ladder for this same reason; a life of pleasure, participation in popular amusements, and economic independence. But most sex workers never achieved fabulous wealth. Most struggled to stay afloat in a system in which nearly everyone exploited their labor. While a sense of “sisterhood” did exist among some prostitutes, exploitation, competition, and rivalry typically defined the lives of these women.

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance the *Appeal*, July 17, 1869 for an article on madam Annie Gallagher's wedding. In 1860, brothels stood in every ward except the seventh and eighth, which at that time were the elite suburbs.

<sup>6</sup> “Cyprian” has historically been a synonym for prostitute due to the association of the island of Cyprus with Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. The worship of Aphrodite involved sacred prostitution. Aphrodite is often referred to as Cytherea or Cypris, “Lady of Cyprus.” This is one of the politer, romantic terms for sex workers employed by nineteenth-century writers.; 1865 Memphis Census, SCA; 1870 U.S. Census, Shelby County, Tennessee; *Bulletin*, May 13, July 31, August 6, 1864.

Only one tenth of sex workers became upwardly mobile in Memphis. Not every prostitute lived in comfortable surroundings; many inhabited shanties or roomed in run-down tenement houses. Competition was fierce and violent at the bottom of the sex trade ladder.<sup>7</sup>

Sex workers seldom attained success, but those who did relied upon grit and the patronage of powerful men. A series of catastrophes natural and man-made worked against the formation of a stable business environment; civil war and yellow fever outbreaks shuttered a number of brothels and prematurely ended the careers of a number of madams. The most successful madams formed partnerships with elite men, maintained lavish parlors, and transformed their brothels into entertainment venues that offered drinking, dancing, gambling, eating, and fortune-telling in addition to sex.

While the promise of wealth and independence attracted some, many found themselves forced into prostitution out of necessity or through coercion. Many women had been driven into prostitution because they were without any means of support or had been abused as children and forced into sex work. Many entered upon the life of a prostitute as children. Parents pressured their children to adopt prostitution in order to help support their family, while others took up sex work to fuel an addiction to morphine or alcohol.<sup>8</sup>

The great bulk of sex workers in Memphis, as well as everywhere in the nineteenth century United States, lived harsh, desperate, and violent lives, and never attained the lavish lifestyle popularly associated with nineteenth-century prostitution. High rates of chemical dependence and suicide among Memphis prostitutes underscore the horrors of their lives.

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<sup>7</sup> This number is derived from censuses, arrest records, and city directories between 1850 and 1900. Using these records, it is possible to track which prostitutes rose from the rank of common sex worker to brothel manager.

<sup>8</sup> Christine Stansell, "Working Women and Prostitution in Nineteenth Century New York" in Mary Beth Norton and Ruth M. Alexander, eds., *Major Problems in American Women's History* (D.C. Heath and Co., 1996), 244; Scott Holzer, *Brawling on the Bluff: Working Class Culture and Politics in Antebellum Memphis* (PhD dissertation, University of Mississippi, 1995), 92-95; For an instance of familial pressure, see the case of Memphis prostitute Camille Carl, *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*, February 26, 1875.

Innumerable occupational hazards, including murder by fellow sex workers and clients, posed a threat to prostitutes. Others died in accidents or from diseases. In addition, prostitutes' personal lives were often troubled. Although a small minority of Memphis madams provided for their children, most Memphis prostitutes failed to do so. The public believed prostitutes to be bad mothers and frequently assumed dead, abandoned infants to have been surreptitiously left by them under bridges and in ravines throughout town. High rates of infanticide and infant mortality among prostitutes, however, have been overstated.<sup>9</sup>

While the Memphis press depicted white prostitutes as victims of male lust and even as romantic figures, they derided black sex workers as naturally depraved. City authorities targeted black vice districts for destruction, particularly during Reconstruction when these areas threatened white supremacy. Red light districts, as places where black men and women congregated away from their homes, also served as sites of Republican political organization. Authorities and the press also blamed the origin of the 1873 Yellow Fever epidemic on a black vice district, Happy Hollow, which the city government summarily demolished. The experiences of slavery and Jim Crow prompted black sex workers to adopt a code of silence with regard to their activities. Even as the white press derided them for their supposed dissipation, elite black madams turned to constructing centers of sexual pleasure that drew white and black men from up and down the river. Not all black sex workers merely survived; many reveled in an atmosphere of sexual license and luxury. Such can be seen in the lavishly decorated brothels of Grace Stanley.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For a fuller treatment of this subject, see Chapter Three below. Marilyn Wood Hill, *Their Sisters' Keepers: Prostitution in New York City, 1830-1870* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 293; Anne M. Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West, 1865-90* (University of Illinois Press, 1987), 45; Judith Kelleher Schafer, *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women*, 73. For suicides, see *Appeal*, July 9, 1861, August 19, 1880, December 10, 1879, June 3, 1874, January 15, 1887. For cases of stillborn children and alleged infanticide, see *Appeal*, February 27, 1861, July 9, 1861, May 23, 1861, October 7, 1872.

<sup>10</sup> Feminist scholars, particularly those who study women of color, have expended a great deal of effort in

Increasingly, after the middle of the 1870s, Memphians turned their attention to reforming prostitutes. These efforts included establishing a “Home for Fallen Women,” known as the Mission Home, or “Refuge.” Founded by the elite Christian women of Memphis, the home attempted to provide jobs for sex workers as well as medical care. Prostitutes disliked the home and local property holders viewed it as a nuisance. In addition, the Mission revealed the class and gender biases of its founders and became, in effect, little more than a prison. For reformers, law enforcement, and the public, determining whether young girls were naturally depraved or victims of lust and abduction depended upon gender, class, and racial markers; not every sex worker deserved pity or assistance. An effort spearheaded by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, a Roman Catholic monastic order, also had mixed results in rescuing women and girls from the sex trade. The Sisters admitted black girls to their institution, subtly challenging the notion of black women's inherent depravity.<sup>11</sup>

By 1900, a clique of merchants, politicians, lawyers, landlords, and city officials openly protected prostitution. Brothels flourished in three areas of the city, all under the watchful and often cooperative eye of the police: along Winchester street in Pinch, along Gayoso and Desoto Streets, and along South Main near a cluster of cotton sheds and cotton gins. Over fifty brothels and close to five hundred saloons operated in Memphis by the turn of the century, more than could be found in cities of similar size. The establishment of Jim Crow led to the emergence of a

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challenging stereotypes such as the asexuality of the mammy and the hypersexuality of the wanton black harlot. This has led to a situation in which feminist historians have been “allergic to pleasure.” In recent years a group of Black Feminist scholars have moved away from challenging sexual stereotypes to focusing on the ways in which black women participated in pleasure. While this study focuses on racial stereotypes and black women's struggles to survive, it also sheds some light on the ways in which black (and white) women embraced pleasure in Memphis. See

<sup>11</sup> Marsha Wedell, *Elite Women and the Reform Impulse in Memphis, 1875-1915* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 37-43; Mazie Hough “Are you or Are You Not Your Sister's Keeper? A Radical Response to the Treatment of Unwed Mothers in Tennessee,” in Elna C. Green, ed., *Before The New Deal: Social Welfare in the South, 1830-1930* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 100-119.

number of elite colored brothels patronized exclusively by white men. Almost all of these establishments had an elite white man – or in the instance of Robert Church, an elite black man – either renting or having a controlling interest in them. Middle-class reformers ultimately failed to stamp out prostitution in Memphis due not only to the persistence of the city's character – rowdy, male dominated, working-class – but because of the strong economic and intimate ties between elite men and sex workers. By the beginning of the twentieth century, vice dominated the economy and culture of Memphis.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> John Pilkington, *The Heart of Yoknapatawpha* (University Press of Mississippi, 1983), 117-119. Robert R. Church, “the South's first black millionaire,” owned a number of brothels in Memphis. For more on Church, see note 30 below. The centrality of vice to Memphis during this period can be seen in “Pappy” Hadden, president of the Memphis taxing district and later mayor. Hadden developed a device known as “Hadden's Horn” which prevented cheating at dice in Memphis gambling establishments. See Lynette Boney Wrenn, *Crisis and Commission Government in Memphis: Elite Rule in a Gilded Age City* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998), 48.

## HISTORIOGRAPHY

Why is prostitution a fitting subject for research and analysis? Frequently I am asked why “the world's oldest profession,” which seems almost transhistorical and unchanging, is relevant beyond providing readers with a few cracking yarns about sex and violence. Prostitution has been at the center of debates regarding attempts by elites to discipline working class groups and control the changes brought about by the rise of industrialization and the market economy. The subject of prostitution illuminates a society's social structure and cultural values, and enables historians to trace how class and gender work together to shape the lives of men and women. Moreover, in a city such as Memphis, prostitution had a racial component, and examining sex across the color line provides insight into how emancipation and Reconstruction reordered gender and sexuality.

While sex, which is linked to biology, may seem fixed and “natural” (and hence unchanging), ideas about sex and the body changed radically during the nineteenth century. In the last decade, scholars' conception of sexuality in the nineteenth century has shifted away from a single “Victorian morality” to one which encompasses the many voices and discourses of the era. The work of Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz proved particularly important for understanding the multitude of voices addressing prostitution in Memphis. Horowitz's *Rereading Sex* presents the development of multiple discourses of sexuality during the nineteenth century. These include vernacular sexuality, with its earthy, humorous, folk conception, evangelicals, who viewed sex

outside of marriage with anxiety, and an emerging medical discourse which variously viewed sexuality as an evil and a positive good. All of these were important to the development of Memphis's sexual landscape, but vernacular sexuality and evangelical notions in particular appear most central. While evangelical reformers called for the creation of a public library to save young men from the wild life of the saloons and whorehouses, aldermen giggled during discussions of prostitutes, courtrooms laughed during bawdy courtroom exchanges, and bored court clerks marked their ledgers with pornographic doodles.<sup>13</sup>

Ideas of sexuality in the nineteenth century South are also complicated by conceptions of race. Studying sex can illuminate the ways in which power operated in the United States during this era. In the last ten years, scholars have turned their attention to the ways in which notions of race, particularly black women's sexual depravity and the necessity of maintaining racial separation, shaped the development of prostitution. Alecia P. Long and Emily E. Landau in particular have focused on the concurrent segregation of prostitutes and African-Americans in the late nineteenth century. Landau found that Jim Crow transformed interracial sex into a lucrative commodity in New Orleans. Men traveled from all over the country to sample the pleasures of interracial sex, transforming New Orleans into the nation's first resort of sex tourism. Memphis underwent a similar change in the late nineteenth century. The development of Beale Street into a high-class resort for white men seeking interracial sex paralleled the rise of Jim Crow and the reestablishment of white supremacy. Beyond the South, Cynthia Blair also made race central to her research on black sex workers in Chicago. Blair found that many black women preferred to work as sex workers rather than to live as domestics or to engage in some other form of drudgery for little pay. The growth of a black presence in Chicago brothels gave

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<sup>13</sup> Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles Over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-century America* (Alfred A. Knopf: 2002), 5-14.

rise to the notion that blacks in general were immoral and degenerate. The white press and reformers, however, cared little about working to reform them, accepting the notion of blacks' inherent depravity. Memphis differed little in this respect. The press and reformers ridiculed or ignored black prostitutes while simultaneously depicting white “fallen ones” as victims or romantic figures.<sup>14</sup>

The foundational texts on prostitution in the nineteenth century United States are on New York and Philadelphia, and the rise of prostitution in those cities against the backdrop of the market revolution. These works have taken the position that the proliferation of prostitution in American urban centers was the result of industrialization and gender inequalities. Women were typically forced into prostitution; they did not seek work as prostitutes for reason of inclination, but in order to survive. The lack of well-paying jobs for women led to a situation in which unskilled women sold the only asset they possessed that was in demand: their bodies. Moral reformer William Sanger, writing on prostitution in New York in the 1850s, verifies this to an extent. He distributed questionnaires to two thousand prostitutes in New York and found that a quarter of respondents had chosen prostitution because of “destitution.” Timothy Gilfoyle and Christine Stansell have also examined prostitution in New York. Gilfoyle traced a shift from “sacred sexuality” to a commercialized, market-oriented sexuality after 1820, paralleling the rise of the market economy. Stansell found that prostitution in New York became “an increasingly viable alternative for women affected by the industrialization process during the nineteenth century.” Prostitution temporarily provided a means of survival in a world being transformed rapidly by the market revolution, but it also enabled women to claim some autonomy for

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<sup>14</sup> Long, *Great Southern Babylon*, 6; Landau, *Spectacular Wickedness*; Cynthia Blair, *I've Got to Make My Livin': Black Women's Sex Work in Turn of the Century Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 11-12, 21-22;



themselves, participate in urban amusements, and embrace youth culture.<sup>15</sup>

Historians working within and outside of American history have focused a great deal of attention on the ways moral crusaders and progressive reformers crafted public policy and established benevolent societies in an attempt to either eliminate prostitution or ameliorate its more destructive characteristics. Judith Walkowitz and Ruth Rosen in particular examined how Victorian and Progressive Era moral crusaders sought to place controls on prostitution and either limit its deleterious effects on society or abolish it outright. Both found that such movements failed, and ultimately made the lives of prostitutes worse. Historians also focused on the ways in which notions of sexuality created a double standard with regard to male and female behavior. Reformers promoted the notion of white women's innate purity. Proponents of middle-class notions of morality marked women who engaged in prostitution as victims ruined by male lust or simply depraved. Elite reformers deployed images of female chastity and asexuality in order to place controls on women. This contrasted with popular notions of sex-driven, "sporting" men. Timothy Gilfoyle argues that sporting men lived by a "promiscuous paradigm" based on sensual pleasure that distanced them from "feminine weakness." Men also turned to prostitution in order to escape women's control of the home and carve out a sexual and leisure space of their own. The ideology of separate spheres that arose in response to industrialization and the rise of the market economy, had ostensibly been created to protect women from the harsher features of the market economy. As home spaces became increasingly feminine, however, men looked outside the home to spaces that would satisfy their craving for rough masculine camaraderie and bawdy entertainments.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> William Sanger, *The History of Prostitution* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1859), 488; Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 313; Raymond Mohl, *The Making of Urban America* (Lanham: SR Books, 1997), 42; Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: 1986), Chapter 9, "Women on the Town."

<sup>16</sup> The work of Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Woman, Class and the State* (Cambridge,

As men looked increasingly outside the home for raucous, bawdy amusements, reformers attempted to push women into the home. Historians have found that many women, in defiance of middle-class crusaders, embraced the open sexual atmosphere of the urban centers of the northeast. Clare A. Lyons' work on Philadelphia found that open expressions of sexuality in the period between the American Revolution and the beginning of the Jacksonian period challenged gender, class and racial hierarchies. She discovered that prostitution developed into a common and open facet of Philadelphia street life, and that briefly during the revolutionary period women gained expanded sexual freedom. She argues the city's rising middle-class curbed the radical potential of this more open, Enlightenment-based sexual culture. Reformers placed controls on women's sexuality, while men retained their sexual freedom outside of marriage. Reformers redefined women engaging in sex outside of marriage as victims of male lust or immoral and unnatural.<sup>17</sup>

Moral reformers in Memphis faced greater difficulty in placing such controls on the women in their midst. The chaos of war, occupation, and finally yellow fever, weakened and distracted reforming elites. A politically ascendant cadre of small merchants and professionals protected prostitution following the Civil War. Saloonkeepers in particular, who allied with prostitutes, exercised a great deal of power in Memphis from 1865 through the 1880s. Memphis reformers were not able to embark on a concerted effort at cleansing their city until the late 1870s when the Women's Christian Association emerged. Their efforts, however, were hampered considerably by changes in Memphis government. The yellow fever calamity of 1878-79, which

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1980), has been particularly influential in moving the study of prostitution away from sensationalism to the lives of prostitutes themselves; Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), Chapter 2, "The Progressive Reaction": Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 115.

<sup>17</sup> Clare A. Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender & Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006)

depopulated the city considerably, led to the revocation of the city charter and a new form of government under a commission. The Taxing District Act, the new set of laws that would govern Memphis between 1879 and 1893, granted the city the power to “control, regulate and suppress” vice. In a city starved for revenue, leaders relied on brothels and gambling dens as important sources of revenue. Authorities protected these establishments and they proliferated under the commission government.

Scholarship on the lives of prostitutes has focused largely on the experiences of women in the northeast and the west, a fact which prevents us from making broad conclusions about the conditions of nineteenth century prostitution in the United States. For the past thirty years historians have debated the conditions of nineteenth century prostitution and the kinds of lives these women led. Anne M. Butler has emphasized the violent, exploitative aspects of prostitution in the American West between the Civil War and 1900, while Marilyn Wood Hill has focused on the ways in which prostitutes formed friendships and protected one another in New York. What was the fate of the average prostitute in Southern urban areas? Did they attain economic independence? Did they face violence and exploitation? With the exception of New Orleans, there are few studies of prostitutes' lives in the South that enable us to answer these questions. Memphis provides an important geographic link between the large cities of the east and the mining camps of the west. As a medium-sized working-class city that retained something of a frontier character, Memphis provides a unique window into the life of the average nineteenth century Southern sex worker. Memphis prostitutes certainly endured great sufferings – inflicted by men and other sex workers – but they also created a world of pleasures and freedom from middle-class constraint where women could seize some measure of autonomy.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Hill, *Their Sisters' Keepers*, 293; Butler, 45; Schafer, 73.

Most scholarship on prostitution in the United States focuses on the urban areas of the North, the Eastern seaboard, and the West. There is a growing body of scholarship on prostitution in the South, including New Orleans, Memphis, Charleston, Richmond, and Savannah. New Orleans in particular attracts a great deal of scholarly and popular interest. The work of Richard Tansey, Judith Kelleher Schafer, Alecia P. Long, and Emily Epstein Landau shed a great deal of light on the world of organized prostitution in the Big Easy and the ways in which it shaped the identity of the city. As the South's largest city, and one of the largest ports in North America, New Orleans developed a large trade in sexual services from its founding. A more tolerant view of sex work rooted in the city's French and Spanish heritage fostered the growth of a large sex trade; during the seventeenth century the French imported prostitutes to New Orleans – known as “cassette girls” – to help boost the population.<sup>19</sup>

New Orleans also developed into a large market for “fancy girls” in the middle of the nineteenth century. These enslaved women fetched high prices as companions and concubines for elite planters. Although their numbers have been overstated, they constituted an important part of the culture of open race mixing, or placage, that existed in New Orleans from its founding. Purchasing “fancy girls” and openly taking black concubines became less common as white sex ratios stabilized along the southern frontier. Open interracial relationships existed in Memphis as well. Marcus Winchester, the first mayor of Memphis, married a quadroon woman

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Tansey, “Prostitution and Politics in Antebellum New Orleans,” in Nancy F. Cott, ed., *History of Women in the United States, Volume 9: Prostitution* (Munich: K.G. Saur Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, 1993), 45-75; Judith Kelleher Schafer, *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women*; Alecia P. Long, *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865-1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2004); Emily Epstein Landau, *Spectacular Wickedness: Sex, Race, and Memory in Storyville, New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013); For scholarship on prostitution in the West, see Marion Goldman, *Gold Diggers and Silver Miners: Prostitution and Social Life on the Comstock Lode* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981) and Anne M. Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West, 1865-1890* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987). “Cassette” or “Casquette” girls were so named because of the small trunks they brought with them to Louisiana. See Landau, 33-34.

from New Orleans named Mary Loïselle.<sup>20</sup>

Sailors, travelers, and river boat hands provided an almost limitless demand for sexual services in the Crescent City. By the middle of the nineteenth century, New Orleans offered hundreds of brothels and thousands of prostitutes. A clique of landlords, lawyers, and small merchants supported prostitution politically and through the courts, but not without encountering opposition from reforming wholesale merchants and manufacturers who sought to purify the city. Brothels operated so openly in New Orleans that in 1857, the city passed the Lorette Ordinance, which attempted to regulate prostitution. The ordinance essentially made prostitution legal in the city so long as it confined itself to out-of-the-way areas. Memphis enacted a similar ordinance the following year, only to repeal it a month later after an outcry from anxious patriarchs. Much like New Orleans, prostitution cliques also protected sex work in the Bluff City.

New Orleans authorities regulated prostitution more openly than those in Memphis, largely because of the tolerant cultural attitude toward prostitution in the Crescent City, but also because of the centrality of the sex trade to the city's economy. Between the Civil War and 1900, the city enacted nine separate ordinances regulating prostitution. In 1897, Alderman Sidney Story wrote the most famous of these ordinances, requiring all prostitutes to be confined to one area of the city; this became known as Storyville, and at its height had over 200 brothels and 1,500 prostitutes. Storyville is the most famous and the most written-about red light district in the United States. Gilded Age prostitution and New Orleans have become synonymous, an image which New Orleans boosters have promoted. Memphis authorities flirted with creating a single segregated district in the 1880s, but this never became a reality.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 37.

<sup>21</sup> Tansey, "Prostitution and Politics," 45; Long, *Great Southern Babylon*, 3; Schafer, *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women*, 145.

Compared to New Orleans, scholars have focused little research on cities such as Richmond, Charleston and Savannah. These cities are, however, more representative of Southern urban centers than New Orleans. These four cities ranged in size from roughly 20,000 to 40,000 inhabitants, and make for useful comparisons with Memphis.

Savannah, a maritime port city that serviced a large plantation district, offers a useful comparison with Memphis, particularly with regard to size and racial composition. Tim Lockley, in examining the survival strategies of lower-class women in Savannah, found that by the middle of the nineteenth century, eighteen houses of prostitution and nearly two hundred sex workers operated in the city, over half of them black. Many of these houses did not operate openly and disguised themselves as boardinghouses. Not only did white men frequent black sex workers, but black men also frequented white prostitutes. This is in contrast to Memphis where interracial prostitution did occur, albeit on a much smaller, less visible scale prior to the war. Although a small population of 700 free blacks lived in Savannah in the middle of the nineteenth century, only 198 free people of color lived in Memphis on the eve of the Civil War. This smaller population may explain why interracial prostitution appeared less frequently in the Bluff City. Weak policing in Savannah led to the proliferation of brothels, prompting the mayor to apply for help to William Sanger, the New York physician and eminent authority on this “social evil.” The Bluff City also suffered from weak enforcement prior to the war, but prostitutes suffered more than anyone as a result. Mobs of “brothel bullies” unleashed their fury on Memphis prostitutes during the late antebellum period, actions which the press vindicated as just vigilante actions.<sup>22</sup>

Memphis, unlike older Southern urban centers such as Charleston and Savannah, grew

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<sup>22</sup> Tim Lockley, “Survival Strategies of Poor White Women in Savannah 1800-1860,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 3 (2012) 415-435. Memphis had fewer black residents than Savannah. Thirty percent of Savannah residents were enslaved in 1860. This was almost double that of Memphis. See Leslie M. Harris and Daina Ramey Berry, eds. *Slavery and Freedom in Savannah* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014), 104.

rapidly and haphazardly. Between 1850 and 1860, Memphis was the fastest growing urban center in the South. As a result of this rapid growth, Memphis elites failed to segregate the city's disreputable elements from its business districts and respectable squares. Marise Bachand's examination of urban space and respectability in Charleston sheds light on how different Memphis was from the typical Southern urban center in the late antebellum period. Bachand finds a gendered geography to Charleston; elite men contained respectable and disreputable women to separate areas to suit their interests. Despite attempts to segregate respectable and disreputable women during the late antebellum period, Memphis elites failed to develop a clear delineation between the two, a reality that would persist for decades.<sup>23</sup>

Research on sex work in Richmond, Virginia, also offers important insights for understanding Memphis prostitution, particularly its size, scope, and racial composition. E. Susan Barber's research on prostitution in wartime Richmond finds a relatively small sex worker population prior to the war. The second largest city in what would become the Confederacy, Richmond had a smaller number of sex workers than Savannah on the eve of the Civil War. Barber has identified 180 sex workers in Richmond, a city more than double the size of Memphis and Savannah. During the war years, however, prostitution grew exponentially in the Confederate capitol, prompting an outcry from respectable citizens. Prostitutes invaded spaces such as Capitol Square, which had been set aside solely for the wives and families of elite men. Barber also found that federal occupation led to a temporary redrawing of the color line. While prior to the war brothels had been largely segregated, the years of Reconstruction gave way to black and white sex workers living and working together. A similar state of affairs existed in

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<sup>23</sup> Marise Bachand, "Gendered Mobility and the Geography of Respectability in Charleston and New Orleans, 1790-1861," *Journal of Southern History*, 1 (2015), 41-78.

Memphis, persisting well into the 1870s.<sup>24</sup>

The earliest histories of Memphis addressed prostitution, but often lacked analysis. A.R. James, Gerald M. Capers, James D. Davis, and William D. Miller record the emergence of prostitution in the city and briefly touch on some of the ways in which local authorities attempted to address it. Characterizing prostitutes as disorderly elements, James and Davis offer little in the way of analysis. Capers and Miller, writing in the early twentieth century, offer some analysis, linking prostitution and vice to the growth and success of the city.<sup>25</sup>

Not until the late twentieth century did prostitution in Memphis become the subject of critical analysis. Scholarship on prostitution in Memphis concentrated on three periods: the Civil War and Reconstruction, the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1878, and the early twentieth century.

Of these three periods, the Civil War garnered the most attention. Darla Brock, Thomas P. Lowry, Jeannine Cole, and James B. Jones researched Civil War-era Memphis sex workers and the ways in which authorities responded to them. Most of this research focuses on the brief program of regulation and licensing which existed under Union occupation between 1864 and 1865. Generally, historians' assessments of this program have been positive. I assert this program was fraught with problems, particularly in the way it ignored black sex workers and failed to slow the spread of venereal disease among black soldiers. Darla Brock's "Memphis Nymphs Du Pave" is concerned with the lives of prostitutes during the war, as well as the manner in which they transformed the terrain of the city. Brock relies almost exclusively upon newspaper records,

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<sup>24</sup> E. Susan Barber, "Depraved and Abandoned Women: Prostitution in Richmond, Virginia, Across the Civil War," in Susanna Defino and Michele Gillespie, eds., *Neither Lady Nor Slave: Working Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 155-173.

<sup>25</sup> John Preson Young, A.R. James, *Standard History of Memphis* (Knoxville: H.W. Crew, 1912), 284; Gerald M. Capers, *The Biography of a River Town. Memphis: Its Heroic Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939), 62, 74, 183; James D. Davis, *The History of the City of Memphis* (Memphis: Hite, Crumpton & Kelly, 1873), 132, 180; William D. Miller, *Memphis During the Progressive Era, 1900-1917* (Memphis, 1957), 88-90, 94-95.



sources which have the tendency to depict sex workers as universally violent, dysfunctional individuals. Brock sees sex workers primarily as victims, a view only partially accurate. Despite this, her work was invaluable as a starting point for my research.<sup>26</sup> Jeannine Cole looks at legalized prostitution in Memphis under Union military occupation. Drawing on the work of Jurgen Habermas, Cole argues the rapid deregulation of prostitution in Memphis following the Civil War was a reaction to prostitutes' incursion into the public sphere. Cole correctly places concerns over prostitutes' entry into the public sphere at the center of debate over the regulation of prostitution in Memphis, but she incorrectly asserts that regulation itself increased public presence of prostitutes within the city. Attention to pre-war conditions, which Cole did not address, reveals that Memphis prostitutes had already invaded the public sphere en masse, and wartime regulation sought to remove them from public. A new cadre of aldermen made up of small grocers and saloon operators who allied themselves with prostitutes deregulated prostitution at war's end.<sup>27</sup> Thomas Lowry and James B. Jones also examined the program of licensing and regulation adopted in Memphis and Nashville during the war. Lowry, a medical doctor, pronounces the program a success, while Jones offers a much more cautious assessment. Jones notes that in Nashville, the system of licensing and medical inspection actually attracted more prostitutes to the city, something the city fathers did not want. In addition, cases of venereal disease increased between April of 1864 and April of 1865. Lowry says nothing about the program's failure to address black women, something which severely undermined its

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<sup>26</sup> Darla Brock, "Memphis's Nymphs du Pave: 'The Most Abandoned Women in the World,'" *The West Tennessee Historical Society Papers*, 50 (1996), 58-69; Thomas P. Lowry, *The Story the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell: Sex in the Civil War* (Stackpole Books, 2012); Jeannine Cole, "Upon the Stage of Disorder: Legalized Prostitution in Memphis and Nashville, 1863-1865," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 68 (2009), 40-65; James B. Jones, "A Tale of Two Cities: The Hidden Battle Against Venereal Disease in Civil War Nashville and Memphis," *Civil War History* 31 (1985); James B. Jones, "Municipal Vice: The Management of Prostitution in Tennessee's Urban Experience. Part I, the Experience of Nashville and Memphis, 1854-1917," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 50 (1991).

<sup>27</sup> Cole "Upon the Stage of Disorder," 40-41.

effectiveness in arresting the spread of venereal disease.<sup>28</sup>

A second group of scholars have focused on the role of sexuality and prostitution in the riots of 1866. Historian Hannah Rosen has examined the role of sexuality in Reconstruction-era Memphis. Rosen's work looks at how sexual violence by white men upheld white supremacy. Rosen challenges accounts of black prostitutes in the Memphis press, which she views as a tactic to undermine black claims to civic equality. Rosen points to evidence of black women being arrested on false charges for disorderly conduct. While this undeniably took place, an examination of Metropolitan Police records for 1866 and 1867 reveals no arrests of black women on charges of prostitution but dozens of arrests for white women. Memphis authorities did not arrest black prostitutes unless they crossed the color line or became disorderly. White Memphians assumed most black women were prostitutes – or at least promiscuous – by nature anyway; it was not necessary to depict them this way to undercut their claims to equality. The existence of many black prostitutes at this time is beyond dispute; this is particularly clear from the 1870 census. Nevertheless, greater violence was directed against black sex workers, not only in the riots of 1866, but in the use of municipal power to stamp them out.<sup>29</sup>

The efforts of reformers to purify the landscape of the city, beginning in the late 1870s, also received attention from scholars. Marsha Wedell's research into elite women and reform movements in Memphis provides important insights into efforts to inculcate prostitutes with the tenets of evangelical Christianity and middle-class respectability. Wedell connects Memphis vice reform movements to the wider progressive movement in the United States. Mazie Hough

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<sup>28</sup> Jones, "Municipal Vice"; Lowry, *The Story the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell*, 86.

<sup>29</sup> Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 57-58; See also Stephen V. Ash, *A Massacre in Memphis: The Race Riot That Shook the Nation One Year After the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013). Ash's analysis is less centered on sexuality, but he does challenge the testimony of a Memphis prostitute, Frances Thompson, before the Congressional Committee on the Memphis riots.

elaborates on the work of Wedell, presenting the activities of the Women's Christian Association as a “radical” challenge to the patriarchal order in Memphis. This is unconvincing, particularly when viewed in light of escapes from the “Refuge Home” and the close cooperation of the WCA with the police department. Reformers failed not only because of the political dominance of prostitution cliques, but because of their inability to see prostitutes as anything but victims or depraved creatures beyond hope.<sup>30</sup>

The Yellow Fever epidemics of 1873 and 1878, in which prostitutes stand out as central heroines, have recently been the subject of scholarly and popular interest. Franklin Wright and Jeanette Keith have paid attention to the experiences of sex workers during the epidemic. Annie Cook, the madam who turned her brothel into a hospital for Yellow Fever patients and who subsequently succumbed to the disease, is the central figure of this scholarly attention. Transformed into a martyr by the press and Howard Association, Cook became part of the lore of the Bluff City. Franklin Wright examined the life of this famous madam through probate records, providing a glimpse behind the legend. Wright also addresses the ways in which Memphians memorialized and transformed Cook into the “Mary Magdalene of Memphis,” an image which persists to this day.<sup>31</sup>

Most recently, scholarship has turned to examining the development of Memphis's culture of vice over the course of the nineteenth century. Preston Lauterbach's important work on the figure of Robert R. Church, “the South's first black millionaire,” begins in 1866 and traces the development of Beale Street under Church's leadership up through the early twentieth century.

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<sup>30</sup> Marsha Wedell, *Elite Women and the Reform Impulse*, 1, 38, 109; Mazie Hough “Are you or Are You Not Your Sister's Keeper? A Radical Response to the Treatment of Unwed Mothers in Tennessee,” in Elna C. Green, ed., *Before The New Deal: Social Welfare in the South, 1830-1930* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 100-119.

<sup>31</sup> Franklin Wright, “Annie Cook: 'The Mary Magdalene of Memphis,’” *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* 43 (1989), 44-54; A recent, well-researched popular work on the 1878 epidemic is Jeanette Keith's *Fever Season: The Story of a Terrifying Epidemic and the People Who saved a City* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2012).

Like Wright's research on Cook, Lauterbach has demythologized Church, a figure who looms large in the history of Memphis and Beale Street. Significantly, Lauterbach found that Church accumulated a large portion of his fortune from the sex trade. Church owned multiple properties throughout Memphis which he rented as brothels to both black and white women. Church emerges as a complicated figure who promoted civic interests, black civil rights, and vice. Lauterbach, however, makes a number of errors throughout this book. He ascribes too much importance to the agency of Church in transforming Gayoso Street into the city's main vice district. Church certainly helped to foster this, but other property holders on Gayoso also rented to sex workers. Lauterbach also incorrectly asserts the city government forcibly relocated all brothels to the Gayoso street district by 1890, when in fact multiple brothels persisted in Pinch and along Main street well into the twentieth century.<sup>32</sup>

It is the intent of this work to synthesize and challenge previous scholarship on the development of prostitution in Memphis, and also to fill lacunae. First and foremost, the lack of scholarly attention to the period before the Civil War must be corrected before the development of the Memphis vice economy can be understood. A key to understanding the development of the Memphis sex trade is the city's rapid growth prior to the Civil War (tied to railroads), skewed sex ratio, and inability of elites to cope with rapid growth by segregating reputable and disreputable elements. This chaotic period of growth spawned mob violence against prostitutes. Unease regarding women's economic independence, but also the association of brothels with free people of color and escaped slaves, prompted violent actions by white residents against prostitutes. Unlike cities in areas with larger, established free black populations, Memphis did not develop a large interracial sex trade until late in the nineteenth century. Memphians, unlike New

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<sup>32</sup> Preston Lauterbach, *Beale Street Dynasty: Sex, Song, and the Struggle for the Soul of Memphis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2015).

Orleanians, remained hesitant about openly regulating prostitution, a fact which arose out of the more strongly Protestant ethos of the Bluff City.

The Civil War era is also important to understanding the growth and influence of the sex trade in Memphis. Union occupation expanded prostitution in the city by protecting and regulating it. Contrary to previous assessments of these regulations, it is my assertion that Union military regulation failed to stop the spread of venereal disease and did not improve the lives of Memphis prostitutes. This proved to be the case because the regulations ignored black women. This arose out of prevalent medical notions regarding black women's libidinous nature and ideas regarding the ubiquity and intractability of venereal disease among blacks generally. The war further strengthened vice interests by removing pre-war elites from power and lifting petty bourgeois shopkeepers into positions of political authority in city wards. These petty bourgeois merchants made common cause with madams and formed prostitution cliques that protected brothels. Elite and middle-class reformers in Memphis remained weak throughout the prewar years largely because of the political dominance of merchants and professionals with ties to prostitution. The Memphis police, like many other police departments in the country, began extracting regular fines (amounting to a tax) from brothels.

When middle-class and elite reformers finally turned their attention to reforming prostitutes in the late 1870s, they encountered a number of obstacles. The Yellow Fever epidemic of 1878, while sweeping away ward government in the city – a principal obstacle to reformers – replaced it with a Taxing District government that sought to regulate and control prostitution rather than stamp it out. Vice interests provided much-needed income to the revenue-starved city. In addition, elite men, including government officials, rented properties to and conducted business with madams. Vice interests continued to exercise a great deal of influence over

municipal politics beyond the turn of the century.

Reformers not only encountered these obstacles, but their flawed conception of who prostitutes were and who was deserving of help, fatally hampered their efforts at reform. By conceiving of prostitutes as victims and treating them like prisoners, reform efforts did little more than serve as a release valve for an overburdened city jail. This was not a “radical” challenge to the patriarchal social order, but upheld dominant ideas about class and race. Reformers largely held to dominant racial notions regarding black women's inherent depravity. This meant that, with the exception of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, reformers ignored black prostitutes and white women who crossed the color line.

With regard to prostitutes' lives, this study attempts to strike a balance between women who entered prostitution through destitution, lack of resources, or coercion, and those who sought out sex work for its promises of freedom from drudgery, participation in youth culture, and pleasure. To solely characterize these women as victims is wrong, but to paint them as carefree participants in a culture of pleasure absent of exploitation and violence is also incorrect. Many women entered into prostitution at a very young age, either through sexual abuse, abduction, or necessity. Orphans, who could count on no family to protect or support them, were especially prone to becoming prostitutes. Sex workers had their own hierarchy, and the lower one found oneself on that hierarchy often dictated the sufferings a prostitute would face. Prostitution, however, could be cruel even to those at the top. Suicides were high even among the high class prostitutes. Violence, chemical dependence, and suicide touched nearly every woman who worked in prostitution in the Bluff City. Nevertheless, as Marilyn Wood Hill has found in New York, prostitutes at times took care of one another and formed friendships. Many embraced the life of the streets with gusto, attending dances and the theater, eating out nightly at oyster

saloons, and wearing finer clothes than their families would have permitted.

With regard to madams, my intent is to move past sentimental and heroic depictions and present them as savvy entrepreneurs who cut deals and crafted a personal and business image as financially independent purveyors of pleasure. Memphis madams, as the most successful members of their class, did not attain to great wealth. They lived as women of modest means, while spending much of their money on maintaining an outward semblance of fabulous wealth. The masks madams created for themselves and their boarders were largely successful; Memphians believed them to be wealthy. In truth, many of these women bought goods on credit and scrimped and saved to get by. Race often dictated what was possible for madams. Black women had a harder time establishing themselves as proprietors of high-class establishments. They relied more so on the patronage of white men to reach the pinnacle of their profession.

## METHODOLOGY AND TERMINOLOGY

It is necessary here to speak to terminology, methodology, and of the problems and limitations of the sources used in this study. This study defines prostitution as:

Negotiation and performance of sexual services for remuneration with or without intervention by a third party (any managers, madams, pimps, business owners, and colleagues making referrals), where those services are advertised or generally recognized as available from a specific location and where the price of services reflects the pressures of supply and demand.<sup>33</sup>

This definition is more exact than the broad definition “offering sexual services for money.” Such a definition is problematic because in some instances financial arrangements are made before marriages, which certainly does not fall within the realm of prostitution.

In most instances during the period in question, prostitutes did not negotiate with their customers. This was usually done by madams, if a woman worked in a brothel. If women indiscriminately accepted proposed transactions, it often indicated exploitation. Women who worked in brothels in this era were typically free to not accept what madams negotiated with customers. If they refused, madams asked boarders to pack their bags and leave. Since finding work in a house proved difficult, many women simply accepted the going rate of the house rather than face the uncertainty of looking elsewhere for board.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> This definition is taken from The Network of Sex Work Projects. See Marissa Hope Ditmore, *Encyclopedia of Prostitution and Sex Work*, Vol. 1 (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006), xxvi.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.



Some feminist scholars and sex work activists consider the terms “prostitute” and “whore” degrading and stigmatizing, and advocate for the use of “sex work” instead. “Sex work” conveys a non-stigmatizing image suggestive of professionalism and value. By linking prostitution to labor, the notion of “sex work” also seeks to lend agency to prostitutes. As “workers,” prostitutes may fight for better conditions, pay, and recognition by governments. This work uses the two terms almost interchangeably. While it is the object of this study to present these women and their lives without stigmatizing them, none of the women discussed in this work would have called themselves “sex workers” and many would not have identified as “prostitutes.” Society would have referred to these women by an array of names: whores, cyprians, demireps, courtesans, unfortunates, fallen ones, magdalenes, and frail women to name but a few. In places, these terms are used, but only out of the need to illustrate the many potential meanings of prostitution and the sex trade. There is no evidence to suggest these women referred to themselves collectively as anything. In addition, as criminologist Jeffrey Ian Ross argues, a victim/agent dichotomy fails to capture “the myriad contradictions and lived realities of life on the street.” Moreover, competition, division, and hierarchy within the sex trade meant that not all of the women in question identified with one another. Any term historians use will, to an extent, be imposed from the outside.<sup>35</sup>

It is necessary to pause here for a moment and explain what is meant by “brothel” in this work. A brothel is used here as a catch-all term for a house or dwelling, whether a house, hotel,

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<sup>35</sup> The term “sex work” was coined in the late 1970s by activist Carol Leigh and popularized by a collection of essays edited by Frédérique Delacoste and Priscilla Alexander, *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry* (Berkeley: Cleis Press, 1998). The notion of “sex work” has radically transformed how scholars understand prostitution by linking it to labor. Criminologist Jeffrey Ian Ross writes regarding “sex work:” “Words such as prostitute, sex worker, or 'victim of sexual exploitation,' make it easy to identify and categorize certain activities in specific ways, maintaining a victim-versus-agent dichotomy . . . Neither 'victim' nor 'agent' allows for the myriad contradictions and lived realities of life on the streets.” See Jeffrey Ian Ross, ed. *Encyclopedia of Street Crime in America* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2013), 341.

saloon or inn, where prostitution was the chief mode of work. When the term “brothel” is used in this work it refers to parlor style, boarding, or more communal modes of living, as these were the most common forms that prostitution took in the city. In most cases in Memphis, brothels were “parlor houses,” so named because the prostitutes gathered in the parlor to entertain guests with music, drink and conversation. In the parlor, the customers selected the women they desired and then retired to rooms reserved for sexual encounters. In this type of brothel, the women all lived together overseen by a madam who extracted either a daily or weekly rent from her inmates or a percentage of what they made from their clients. A variant on this was the boarding style brothel, where women rented a room of their own from a madam who also ran her brothel as a normal boarding house. In some instances, women simply lived together in a house or converted store and engaged in prostitution. A “madam” was not always present.

On a smaller, more individualistic scale were women who worked out of rooms or “cribs” they rented from landlords. This was undoubtedly one of the more degrading forms of prostitution. Cribs were small, often one-room shacks that were thrown up by landlords seeking to maximize the number of dwellings on a given lot. The exact extent of crib prostitution in Memphis remains unknown, although at least one reference to it exists. Shacks, “shebangs,” and shanties are a sub-category of cribs. These were slightly larger than an average crib, but not large enough to be considered brothels. Multiple women roomed together in ramshackle dwellings such as these. This type of dwelling was common to the east of the Bayou near the city limits and were usually inhabited by black prostitutes. It is likely that some of the tenement houses in Memphis were portioned out as cribs as well. Still lower than these were the homeless prostitutes, who at times are found in arrest records sleeping on sidewalks or “laying out” on the bluff.

Determining the identities of prostitutes and madams through court records poses problems for the researcher for a number of reasons. Locating prostitutes within the archives proved difficult specifically because these women had abandoned whatever identities they once had in favor of an alias or working name. Comparing names found in census records with names found in arrest records presented some difficulties. Many women used aliases, sometimes commonplace like Mary Williams, or more colorful names like Moll Rose, Puss Pettus, or Rose Lovejoy. Names found in arrest records would then be looked up in the appropriate census. Often names would be slightly different, such as in the case of Margaret Hayden, who was referred to variously as Maggie or Mollie. Rosalie Pavid was known variously as Louisa Morris, French Lou, Louisa Stallings, and Rosa Brockley. Not until she was almost murdered in 1858 did her real name come to be associated with her working name in the city papers.

In addition to the difficulty in tracing names, prostitution occupied a somewhat ambiguous place in the eyes of the law in the towns along the Mississippi River. In Memphis, as well as in Natchez and Vicksburg, officials often winked at prostitution which received only infrequent bursts of enforcement after public outcry was elicited by its glaring excesses. Most prostitutes emerge in the legal documents under the charge of keeping or being the “inmate” of a “bawdy house” a “house of ill fame” or at times for keeping a “disorderly house.” The Memphis ordinance books defined these terms rather loosely, and the interchangeability of the terms suggest that much of determining what made a dwelling a house of prostitution was up to police discretion. The *Digest of Memphis Charters and Ordinances* for 1860 defined a “house of ill fame” as a “place for the practice of fornication.” By nineteenth century moral standards this could be interpreted to mean the house of any unmarried woman cohabiting with a man. However, this was defined specifically as “cohabitation” or simply “fornication,” a crime which

carried the same penalty. The term a “disorderly house” derived from a legal term in English common law and covered a wide variety of activities including selling liquor to slaves, gambling, disturbing the peace, or holding parties on Sundays. Such a charge did not necessarily mean that a woman or women had engaged in prostitution, although some indictments for keeping a disorderly house explicitly mention “whoring.”<sup>36</sup>

The broad powers of the police in enforcing patriarchal control raises the question of whether one can rely on police records. The short answer is yes and no. To be sure, authorities policed women's behavior by denying their sexuality and insisting that they remain under patriarchal authority. Southern society viewed “lewd women” as a threat to public order. But at the same time, white males used brothels for both pleasure and profit. “Abandoned women” came under the protection of businessmen, politicians, and even the police. As such, the enforcement of laws regulating the sex trade and the behavior of women revealed more complication than a top-down enforcement of patriarchal mores upon women seeking personal and sexual freedom. Rather, the words of one Kentucky jurist guided enforcement: “The bawd we have always had with us.” The niche that prostitution filled, and the manner in which it intertwined with the power structure of the city's business elite, made it intractable. Enforcement aimed at removing brothels when they became particularly onerous to respectable citizens, but not stamping them out entirely.<sup>37</sup>

The police and recorder's courts did not usually wish to see women sent to the workhouse for prostitution, particularly when it might be profitable for justices and officers to take

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<sup>36</sup> Smith P. Bankhead, *Digest of the Charters and Ordinances of the City of Memphis* (Memphis: Saunders, Oberly & Jones, 1860), 273.

<sup>37</sup> Quotation taken from William J. Novak, *The People's Welfare: Law and Regulation in Nineteenth Century America* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1996); For more on ways in which the legal system attempted to place controls on women, see Victoria E. Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

kickbacks from madams. On numerous occasions throughout the period in question the city charged police with corruption, especially of taking bribes from madams, and protecting the sex trade. Arrests for prostitution did not always result in a conviction. City recorders set many women charged with prostitution at liberty, including notorious madams released without being fined. Where it is possible to interrogate police and court sources closely, I have done so. For the most part, when court records indicate guilt or innocence, I take the finding of the court at face value. These were indeed “public” women; the community and the police knew the profession of the prostitutes in their midst. The open, public character of sex work in nineteenth century Memphis obviated the need to amass a great deal of evidence to “prove” involvement in prostitution.

Census records were less problematic sources than court and police records. Locating brothels in census records proved comparatively simple, particularly when cross referenced with newspapers and court records. The household arrangement of brothels differed from the typical urban household in the antebellum South. Most brothels in Memphis contained between six and twelve women. Census records explicitly named many brothels as such, but not always. Occasionally these would be called “boarding houses,” but after finding repeated arrests for proprietors and boarders on charges of prostitution it became clear that these were in fact brothels. Madam Mary Miller was one such boarding house proprietor; she advertised her “*private* boarding” house in the city directory, with special emphasis being placed on “private.” Most of the women who lived in brothels had different surnames from each other and tended to hail from other states or immigrated. Occasionally women listed their occupation as dressmaker, “sewing,” or another domestic occupation as a means of concealing their true profession from the law. Many women did in fact engage in the dress making or millinery trades, but turned to

prostitution to supplement their income.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> The number of women who inhabited Memphis brothels is derived from U.S. Census records for 1850, 1860, 1870, 1880, and 1900; The notice for Miller's "private" boarding house is found in the 1859 *Memphis Directory*, 124.

## CHAPTER ONE: "MUD AND STRUMPETS:" PROSTITUTION IN MEMPHIS BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR

On the night of March 28, 1837, a crowd of "respectable gentlemen" gathered outside a groggery and whorehouse, the home of Mrs. Smith, "an open and abandoned prostitute, and a violent and ungovernable woman," for the purpose of executing some sort of vengeance. Earlier that day, a "highly respectable widow lady" whose name has not been recorded, approached Smith and demanded that she return a runaway enslaved woman whom Smith had been harboring in her home. The two must have exchanged heated words; Smith denied the veracity of her claim and was prepared to defend such an attack on her reputation with force. One of Smith's "intimate" friends, a gambler or fancy man, urged her to give the woman a sound whipping. As the widow left, presumably to fetch assistance in obtaining her slave, Smith pursued after her with a cowhide. In the middle of town, and "in the presence of numerous persons," Smith commenced a "brutal assault" on the woman, chasing and whipping her through the muddy lanes, until the victim sought shelter in a nearby store.<sup>39</sup>

The crowd that gathered to avenge this assault carried arms and the light from their torches cast a menacing light. In addition to Smith, and perhaps an escaped slave, an indeterminate number of gamblers, pimps, and fancy men lived in the house, along with an unknown number of prostitutes. Probably little more than a clapboard shanty, the house which probably doubled as a low saloon and whorehouse, could not resist the torches of its assailants.

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<sup>39</sup> James D. Davis, *History of Memphis*, 180; "Miscellaneous," *The Liberator*, Friday, April 28, 1837, pg. 72.

The crowd demanded the madam and the inhabitants of the disreputable house surrender themselves; the besieged inhabitants answered with gunfire. In the ensuing gunfight and scuffle, one man was shot in the thigh, shattering bone; a wound that probably proved fatal. The house was then set alight and reduced to a smoldering heap, but not before most of those inside had been apprehended and roughed up.<sup>40</sup>

The crowd paraded the inmates to Johnson's Tavern, usually one of the “dullest places” in town, but now crowded with nearly every resident of Memphis. Drawn by the sound of shouting voices, gunfire, and the sight of flames, the gathered citizens drafted a resolution voicing their support for the vigilante action. The public meeting then noisily discussed how the “obnoxious individuals” should be punished. The assembly convened a kangaroo court in the tavern as Smith and her associates, bound with fetters, looked on. After some suggestions, debate, and guffawing, the assemblage hit upon a proposal that met with their approval: “set them in a boat without an oar, and set them adrift in the middle of the Mississippi.” The crowd appointed a committee to carry out the sentence. One man vocally disagreed with the proceedings; he worked for one of the accused. After “considerable ill treatment” the mob placed this lone dissenting voice, along with the rest of the accused, aboard a raft in the middle of the river and cast them adrift. The fate of this party of prostitutes and gamblers is unknown.<sup>41</sup>

This incident from 1837 exemplifies the manner in which Memphians reacted to prostitution in their midst prior to the Civil War. During the first four decades of the city's existence, Memphians responded to brothels and prostitutes with mob violence. In the absence of an established law enforcement apparatus, Memphians responded with mob violence in instances when individuals overstepped the bounds of acceptable behavior within the community. But even

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pg. 72.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.; *Memphis Daily Appeal.*, July 23, 1871, pg. 4.



after the establishment of a police force, outraged citizens resorted to brothel riots, organized vigilantism, and arson to destroy houses of prostitution. The 1837 incident, and others like it, gave voice to a number of anxieties regarding houses of ill-fame: enforcing moral order, upholding proper gender roles, disciplining those who did not embrace thrift and hard work, protecting white supremacy, and anger over independent, economically successful women.<sup>42</sup>

Visitors and residents of West Tennessee associated Memphis with disreputable people and rustic frontier conditions. Alexis de Tocqueville, while traveling through Memphis in 1831, was struck by its desolation. Frank Latham, the founder of nearby Randolph, Tennessee, commented that Memphis was known for two things: “mud and strumpets.” The town's boosters and elite merchants worked to overcome this image by transforming the village from a rough and tumble river town to an orderly commercial center. This meant initially purifying it of gamblers, which the city had largely done in 1835 and 1836, when two other outbreaks of vigilantism cleansed the landing of card sharps and other disreputable characters. The next twenty years, however, witnessed an economic transformation that would not only turn Memphis into an important commercial center, but a rip-roaring Gomorrah where palaces of sin operated openly in all their glare and glory.<sup>43</sup>

The origins of the sex trade in Memphis can be located in the earliest period of its settlement by whites and African Americans, in which an imbalanced frontier sex ratio and

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<sup>42</sup> The events in Memphis in 1837 were common in settlements of the Old Southwest during the “flush times” of the 1830s. Vicksburg was the scene of a mass lynching directed against gamblers in 1835, and the “Murrell Panic” inspired similar actions in other communities along the Mississippi. A number of historians have addressed outbreak of mob violence in antebellum America, including the Southwest, during the 1830s: Christopher Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch* (Palgrave, 2004), 27-32; David Grimsted, *American Mobbing, 1828-1861: Toward Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 12; Joshua D. Rothman, *Flush Times and Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson* (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2014). Rothman connects attacks on gamblers to anxieties over the flush times themselves: growing social isolation, wild speculation, greed, and fast talking lawyers and swindlers.

<sup>43</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Memoirs, Letters, and Remains of Alexis de Tocqueville, Vol. 1* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1862), 37; *Randolph Recorder*, February 6, 1835.

isolation of frontier life, created a culture of open interracial concubinage and prostitution. As the settlement grew, so did prostitution. The growth of Memphis into an important cotton shipping center in the 1840s and 50s, as well as the completion of railroads linking Memphis to the east coast and the larger cities of the Mississippi and Ohio valleys, proved the turning point in the development of a booming sex trade in the city. Women, like many male laborers from the cities of the east, flocked to Memphis to take advantage of better wages. However, many women found securing well-paying employment as unskilled domestics difficult. This led to the further growth of the sex trade, as women realized that prostitution offered superior wages to work as domestics or unskilled laborers. Memphis remained a largely male city, however, and it developed a rowdy culture of masculine entertainment centered around theaters, saloons, gambling halls and brothels.

The explosion in the scope of the sex trade alarmed middle-class reformers, who worried over the deleterious effects of sporting culture on their sons and daughters and the image of Memphis as a developing commercial center. As a result, conflict arose between sex workers, their landlords and mercantile allies, and a rising middle-class wishing to push prostitution out of the community. The middle-class urge to control prostitution emerged out of a desire to enforce sexual morality and purify the city, but also uphold gender and racial norms. Madams were not only independent “lewd” women, but their establishments often served as sites of interracial liaisons.

Prostitutes encountered violence from a cadre of elites and working class men. Such a tactic received approval from the city's press, who defended violence against sex workers as necessary for the protection of order and virtue. This violence reached a fever pitch in 1858 when assailants burned brothels, humiliated and attacked sex workers, and attempted to drive them,

unsuccessfully, from the city. The violence culminated in an attempt to license and regulate brothels in Memphis, an effort ultimately defeated by anxious patriarchs and evangelicals concerned about the effects of legally sanctioning sin. In response, city officials adopted an unofficial system of toleration of sex work, recognizing that it could neither be stamped out nor openly licensed. So long as brothels remained orderly, authorities extracted an informal licensing fee in exchange for freedom from police interference. On the eve of the Civil War, Memphis sex workers occupied an important position in the city's economy and culture, a position that would only grow in the following years.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, what would become Memphis was little more than a frontier outpost consisting of a military garrison and a small Native American settlement on the fourth Chickasaw bluff. Like other settlements then emerging along the Mississippi River, a small population of rough men and an even smaller number of white women called Shelby County home. The 1820 census of Shelby County records 94 adult white males and 51 adult white females. In addition to these, 113 slaves lived in Shelby County. Women made up slightly more than half of these enslaved people. The first large group of white men to settle Memphis, at least semi-permanently, served in the United States military. Two regiments stationed at Fort Pickering had been sent to protect the western frontier and oversee a government factory that traded with the Chickasaw Nation. These men probably formed sexual unions with what one observer sneeringly referred to as the “half breed” Chickasaws who lived nearby, which he judged to be “too indolent to do any permanent good, either for themselves or society.” Other white residents included a number of squatters who had been living in the vicinity of Memphis since the end of the War of 1812, among them Isaac Rawlings, the second mayor of Memphis. By the second decade of the nineteenth century, a group of investors and land speculators

including John Overton, James Winchester, and Andrew Jackson, chartered Memphis in the hope of selling town lots to settlers. Laid out in orderly lots on the bluff, Memphis grew from “a group of rather miserable houses” to a thriving frontier town, so that by 1832 the population numbered nearly one thousand residents.<sup>44</sup>

Early settlers consisted of farmers, planters and their slaves, and a small but growing number of merchants and professionals. A floating population of Kentucky boatmen, who carried cotton and other produce south to trade in Vicksburg, Natchez and New Orleans, also joined the embryonic community in the first decades. Frances Trollope described these men as a “disorderly set of persons, constantly gambling and wrangling, very seldom sober, and never suffering a night to pass without giving practical proof of the respect in which they hold the doctrines of equality and community of property.” With these men came a set of unprincipled adventurers; ne'er-do-wells and professional gamblers who perennially haunted the small frontier river settlements from New Orleans to St. Louis. This wide assortment of male residents and visitors often indulged in heavy drinking, gambling, fighting and whoring.<sup>45</sup>

The number of white female residents remained low in the first decade of settlement. This factor, combined with the absence of hard codes of racial conduct in the frontier community, often led to open interracial sexual liaisons. Christian Schultz, an early tourist of the Mississippi valley, recorded how “copper-coloured votaries of the Cyprian queen” plied their trade on the flat boats that docked in Natchez. Similar scenes may have been common in Memphis. One scholar

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<sup>44</sup> 1820 U.S. Census, Shelby County, Tennessee, population and slave schedules; Beverly G. Bond, Janann Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), 18-19; John Preston Young, *Standard History of Memphis*, 51; G. Wayne Dowdy, *A Brief History of Memphis* (Charleston: The History Press, 2011), 13-17.

<sup>45</sup> Frances Milton Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, Vol. I (London, 1832), 22; For more on the rivermen of the Mississippi, see Michael Allen, *Western Rivermen, 1763-1861: Ohio and Mississippi Boatmen and the Myth of the Alligator Horse* (Louisiana State University Press, 1990); For the activities of rivermen and gamblers in towns along the Mississippi, see Michael Beard, “Natchez Under-the-Hill: Reform and Retribution in Early Natchez,” *Gulf Coast Historical Review* 4 (1988), 29-48.

has argued that the comparatively large numbers of Native American and black women in and around Memphis in its first decades may have prevented any demand for white prostitutes.<sup>46</sup>

Native American women, slaves, or free women of color served as concubines for early white male settlers of Shelby County. An early Memphis resident noted with disapproval that interracial sexual relationships became “quite common” in the 1820s and 1830s. Keeping concubines developed into a common practice among even the town's first citizens. Marcus Winchester, the first mayor of Memphis, married a quadroon woman named Mary Loiselle in the 1820s. The union aroused a great deal of popular opposition among Memphis residents. Winchester's successor, Isaac Rawlings, also kept his enslaved housekeeper as a concubine. Indeed, Shelby County in the 1820s served as a veritable laboratory in racial equality and admixture. Frances Wright, the Scottish-born utopian and abolitionist established the community of Nashoba thirteen miles east of Memphis in 1825. Intended as an experiment in emancipation, Wright settled a number of slaves which she intended to educate and ultimately free. Wright counted the Winchesters among her closest friends in Shelby County in the mid-1820s, so much so that Marcus Winchester named his second daughter Frances Wright Winchester.<sup>47</sup>

Wright preached the necessity of race mixing to the solution of the problem of race in the United States, and sought to establish a multi-racial community based around her utopian socialist ideals. The community faced numerous problems from within and from without. Memphians disliked Wright and her disquisitions on slavery and behavior stepped beyond the bounds of acceptable female conduct. A Memphis resident observed that Wright also “opposed matrimony” and “had some peculiar notions” about the interaction of the sexes. These views

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<sup>46</sup> Christian Schultz, *Travels On an Inland Voyage* (New York, 1810), 136; Capers, *Biography of a River Town*, 62.

<sup>47</sup> Davis, *History of Memphis*, 73; Shields McIlwaine, *Memphis Down in Dixie* (E.P. Dutton, 1948), 67; Celia Morris, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America* (University of Illinois Press, 1992), 113

earned Wright few friends in the small community. James Richardson, a trustee of Nashoba, put Wright's racial teachings into practice and began living openly with one of the free women of color in the community. When word reached the Northeast, outraged abolitionists charged that Wright had established a "brothel" at Nashoba, a charge which Wright and Richardson vehemently denied. Plagued by mismanagement, the Nashoba experiment failed in 1828.<sup>48</sup>

Nashoba, despite its reputation for licentiousness, hardly constituted a brothel. The little town then clinging to the river front, however, rapidly developed its own brothels, inextricably binding the fate of the village to a highly profitable vice economy. The "scarlet trade" first began at the Bell Tavern, one of the first taverns in the tiny burg, which also acted as a saloon and gambling hall. Kept initially by Paddy Meagher, and then later by Sam Stogden (or Stockton), a gambler and "scoundrel" who "delighted in intrigues with women," the Bell Tavern became a symbol of the growth of Memphis, as well as the development of a large economic sector based around sex.<sup>49</sup>

The first organized prostitution in Memphis took place during Stogden's brief administration of the tavern. Gambling halls and saloons along the river commonly featured women of pleasure. English traveler Tyrone Power remarked at the flagrant display of "half-dressed, faded young girls" in the doorways of Natchez's "gambling hells." Given the large numbers of boatmen and gamblers who frequented the Fourth Bluff, similar scenes may have been common in Memphis. By the 1820s, the Bell Tavern came to be inhabited by a number of confidence men and cardsharps who swindled travelers and locals out of their earnings. There must have been sex workers among these men of the "sporting fraternity," as the class of professional gamblers seldom worked without a number of female hangers-on who turned tricks

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<sup>48</sup> Davis, *History of Memphis*, 83-84; Morris, *Fanny Wright*, 143, 165.

<sup>49</sup> Davis, *History of Memphis*, 132.

and also participated in swindles. Stogden quickly discovered that prostitution offered more profits than running a saloon, and only months after taking over as proprietor of the Bell Tavern, he partnered with another Memphian to establish the first house of ill-fame on the bluff in 1830.<sup>50</sup>

Of the location of this first house of prostitution and of the women themselves, little is known. But clearly by about 1830, women who sought work in houses of prostitution had begun to populate the city in larger numbers. By the early 1830s, the population of white women in Shelby County between the ages of 15 and 40 – the age range from which the vast majority of professional sex workers came - had grown to 653. In addition, Memphis became the home of a number of lower class residents who settled in the area known as “Pinch Gut.” The neighborhood, situated at the north end of the town, embraced an area on the Bayou Gayoso known as “Catfish Bay.” The “bay,” little more than a lake created by a bend in the bayou, served as a convenient location for flatboats to dock and then break up, as the landing at that time proved unsafe for that purpose. The leftover driftwood provided a convenient source of lumber for the construction of shanties which served as homes for the lower class squatter families. Catfish Bay and Pinch - so named because of the lean, hungry appearance of its residents – formed a ramshackle, squalid neighborhood home to a number of predominantly Irish immigrant families. The first white sex workers in the city came from among these early Irish residents. Between 1830 and the Civil War, approximately one third of all prostitutes in the city hailed from Ireland or had Irish parents.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Tyrone Power, *Impressions of America During the Years 1833, 1834, and 1835*, Volume 2 (London, 1836), 196; Davis, *History of Memphis*, 132.

<sup>51</sup> 1830 U.S. Census, Shelby County, Tennessee, population schedule; Davis, *History of Memphis*, 109 112; Origins of pre-war prostitutes are derived primarily from surnames found in 1860 U.S. Census for Shelby County and arrest records found in Memphis Recorder Dockets for 1857-1861.

Catfish Bay later became such a nuisance to the town that Mayor Isaac Rawlings sought to raze it to the ground. The effort met with considerable resistance from residents, who viewed the effort to demolish their homes as a “tyrannical infraction of the poor man's rights, and a violation of the Constitution.” Lower class residents united against the measure and repudiated Rawlings. But shortly thereafter, a vigilante or group of citizens overturned a boatload of animal waste in Catfish Bay, rendering the area unfit for human habitation.<sup>52</sup>

In the following years sporting men, prostitutes, confidence men, and squatters continued to present challenges for the city's rising commercial elite. Like other municipalities in the United States, divisions developed in Memphis between those who opposed organized vice and those who supported it, either directly or indirectly. On the one hand, many opposed prostitution for moral reasons. The Second Great Awakening, spurred by ministerial anxiety over the unchurched western settlers, brought a message of personal redemption to those on the frontier, but it also reaffirmed and hardened rules regulating sexuality. For middle-class, evangelical observers, confidence men and prostitutes also symbolized the worst of the market revolution remaking the social, cultural and political life of the nation. To middle-class Americans, sex workers and gamblers pursued wealth without virtue, thrift and hard work. They also insinuated themselves into respectable circles through guile and ill-gotten wealth. The emerging bourgeois ideology of market capitalism, which demanded self-control and disciplining of base urges, faced challenges in the sporting subculture of sex and gambling, particularly in the large cities of the Northeast. While making slower inroads in the South, this ideology nevertheless influenced the development of Southern towns like Memphis. Pamphlets and books warned young men of the dangers of vice. Prostitutes threatened the gender order by simply being “self-made,”

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<sup>52</sup> Davis, 112.



independent women in a culture which severely curtailed the work white women could do beyond the surveillance of their parents or husbands. On a more practical level, however, prostitutes and their associates presented townspeople with a surfeit of noise, violence, and attendant crime.<sup>53</sup>

The commercial elite of Memphis, who largely represented the interests of the town's proprietors, sought to curb the disorder promoted by a sporting culture. Throughout the 1830s gamblers and town authorities skirmished over the limits of the law to regulate their activities, culminating in the establishment of a refuge for gamblers on the opposite bank of the Mississippi, a fledgling community called Pedraza. The "Pedraza Hotel," built from salvaged flatboat wood, formed the nucleus of this small community. The hotel became a haunt for not only gamblers and "black legs," but also prostitutes. For three years the hotel operated under the management of a woman whose name has not been recorded; the first of a long line of Memphis madams. Rather than draw gamblers and prostitutes away from Memphis, a brisk ferry traffic ensured that anyone offending standards of public decency could simply escape to Pedraza and then later return to Memphis. A small Memphis grocery kept by 'Squire James conducted a considerable business with the gamblers and "lewd women" of Pedraza; ties between small shopkeepers and vice elements would grow in the coming decades.<sup>54</sup>

Historian James D. Davis records that gamblers effectively ruled the surrounding area at the time, as no means existed to police them. In the early 1830s Memphis had a single constable

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<sup>53</sup> A confidence man, also known as a mountebank, is a con-man. A work that links anxieties over the Market Revolution with the rise of the Second Great Awakening is Paul E. Johnson *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004); The classic work on the Market Revolution is Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); On sporting culture, see Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, and Patricia Cline Cohen, Timothy Gilfoyle, eds. *The Flash Press: Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840s New York* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Jackson Learns in *Something for Nothing: Luck in America* (Viking, 2003) chronicles the ways in which gambling challenged the middle-class worldview of hard work and self-control.

<sup>54</sup> Davis, *History of Memphis*, 169-171.

who enforced the law during the daylight hours. As long as profits remained high, ferry operators and merchants turned a blind eye to disturbances caused by gamblers and unruly prostitutes. According to Davis, gamblers, boatmen and prostitutes “were therefore at liberty to fight, shoot and yell as much as they pleased, without the fear of being interfered with.” Matters changed after July of 1835, when the citizens of Vicksburg, Mississippi summarily hanged a number of gamblers in an explosion of mob violence. The events that transpired in Vicksburg inspired Memphians to issue an ultimatum to the sporting fraternity of Memphis: *leave town or face a similar fate*. Gamblers and prostitutes withdrew to Pedraza, and in response threatened to burn Memphis to the ground. A raid followed in which a group of gamblers from Pedraza launched an amphibious assault on Memphis.irate residents repulsed the assailants and pursued them back to Pedraza. The threat proved to be little more than bluster. Shortly thereafter the “Pedraza Hotel” burned, ending the brief career of the vicious community on the opposite bank of the river.<sup>55</sup>

In the following years, the city aldermen enacted more stringent laws to regulate vice, particularly gambling. In 1838 the city imposed a fine on persons “shooting, whooping, gambling or swearing” within the limits of the town. The city also hired two night watchmen to detain any “disorderly” persons. Prostitution remained, at least tentatively, legal until 1850. Race decisively influenced the city's decision to more strongly police commercialized sex. In all of the instances in which prostitution burst forth into the public gaze between 1830 and 1850, race played a central role. Sex workers plied their trade across the color line, made business connections with free blacks, and harbored runaway slaves. At least one early Memphis whorehouse offered sex with black women.<sup>56</sup>

A group of prostitutes established themselves in Chelsea, a suburb north of Memphis, in

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 175-176.

<sup>56</sup> Dowdy, *A Brief History*, 18.

1832. Then a “perfect wilderness” outside the town limits, the women had been “tolerated on their promise of behaving themselves.” The women came under the scrutiny of the town once they contracted with Alfred Richardson, a free man of color, to convey them in his public carriage. Richardson, one of only a handful of free blacks in the city at the time, lived with another free man of color who may have been his son. Apart from Mary Loiselle, the wife of Marcus Winchester, Richardson may have been the most successful free person of color in the village. Through his work as a blacksmith, Richardson accumulated property, including a carriage, which he operated as the first public carriage in the city. Like others drawn to the sex trade, Richardson knew that it promised considerable financial returns to contract with prostitutes.<sup>57</sup>

Until the 1830s, free blacks possessed many of the same legal rights as white Memphians. Free black men had the right to vote and obtain a public education. After 1831, changes in the state constitution and local ordinances, influenced in part by Nat Turner's rebellion, restricted the rights of free blacks in Tennessee. Free blacks could not associate with whites and could associate with slaves only by permission. In addition, free blacks were limited to certain forms of work, largely menial, although a few excelled at skilled trades, and working small farms.<sup>58</sup>

Free black men in other cities along the river, notably Natchez, tapped into the sex trade in order to survive. Few professions beyond working as draymen, barbers, blacksmiths or hack drivers were open to free men of color, and few professions provided such considerable income as pimping and keeping bawdyhouses. But men like Richardson came under particular scrutiny

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<sup>57</sup> Davis, *History of Memphis*, 253-255; 1830 U.S. Census, Shelby County, Tennessee, population schedule, pg. 3.

<sup>58</sup> Paul H. Bergeron, *Paths of the Past: Tennessee, 1770-1970* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1979), 45; Bond, *Memphis in Black and White*, 40.

for their involvement with white prostitutes, not only because of fears of miscegenation, but also because Southerners viewed free black economic success with a measure of trepidation. Free black men received one fifth of all charges for operating “disorderly houses” and “houses of ill-fame” in the city of Natchez between 1816 and 1830. Black men constituted one third of all male brothel keepers in Natchez. Many free blacks who lived in cities kept small groceries that doubled as groggeries and gambling parlors; some of these establishments undoubtedly offered the services of prostitutes. The court described Elias Chavois, a free man of color in Natchez accused of keeping a “house of evil fame,” as “an evil disposed, dissolute and disorderly person.” Like these men, Richardson turned to prostitution as a means of attaining a measure of economic independence in a slave society that sought to control black labor.<sup>59</sup>

The women Richardson carried about town, predominantly up and down Chickasaw Street, grew increasingly bold in the manner of their deportment. They dressed in “fantastic style” and paraded the street “in a body,” evidently in a constant state of intoxication, hurling abusive language at passersby. In this manner the women advertised their services, picking up customers and conveying them back to their bordello in Chelsea. The situation proved intolerable for some, and a group of vigilantes pressed the town's recently purchased fire engine, known as the “Vigor,” into the service of enforcing moral and racial propriety. In addition to putting out fires, the “Vigor” also served in hosing down disorderly houses. For this particular occasion, the vigilantes filled “Vigor” with foetid soap suds and “several pounds” of lampblack. When the carriage again tumbled down the street, Vigor unleashed a jet of foul-smelling black liquid that hurled Richardson and the women from the carriage, tarring their skin and clothing. The use of

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<sup>59</sup> State of Mississippi v. Louis Burwell, 1818; State of Mississippi v. Peter Bell, 1824; State of Mississippi v. Elias Chavois, 1825; State of Mississippi v. Joseph Galvan, 1824, Historic Natchez Foundation; For more on the professions of free blacks, see Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (Oxford University Press, 1981).

lampblack to paint Richardson and the sex workers as black carries clear racial overtones. Mobs frequently employed lampblack against antislavery activists and those who engaged in race-mixing. The assault injured several of the women and Richardson “was furious.” The townspeople “quietly” informed the women that they should leave town and limit their activities to the other side of the bayou.<sup>60</sup>

Resistance to slavery and the slave trade by African Americans and others prompted the city aldermen to pass a series of laws controlling the movement of African Americans. Authorities locked any person of color, whether free or slave, discovered on the streets after 10:00 p.m. in the city jail until the following morning. Slaves caught after this hour received ten lashes, and their owners fined ten dollars. Despite these efforts, notices of runaway slaves appeared frequently in the *Memphis Enquirer* during the late 1830s. Brothels, as places beyond respectable public gaze, may have served as places of refuge for the enslaved. The vigilante action against Madam Smith, who harbored a runaway slave in 1837, grew out of greater vigilance over the slave population in the wake of Nat Turner's rebellion and growing anti-slavery agitation at the North. Sex workers had already shown their willingness to ally themselves with free blacks like Alfred Richardson. The response of the community in this instance went beyond humiliation with lampblack and embraced deadly violence. Memphians would not tolerate disorderly lewd women, let alone disorderly lewd women who harbored slaves.<sup>61</sup>

By the 1840s, Memphis had changed little from the frontier flatboat town it had been in the early 1830s. The population remained small, with only 1,800 residents, up from roughly 650

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<sup>60</sup> Davis, *History of Memphis*, 253-255; Parker Pillsbury, *Acts of the Anti-Slavery Apostles* (Boston, 1884), 346-347.

<sup>61</sup> Dowdy, *Brief History*, 18; *Memphis Enquirer*, August 2, August 30, September 7, October 11, November 1, 1839.

ten years previous. Law and order held a stronger sway over the town, but only because Memphians stood ready to unleash mob violence against perpetrators. A trade in sexual services may have continued to persist in the village, although its scale is impossible to know. After the events of April of 1837, sex workers may have been less willing to set up shop there. Nevertheless, advertisements for an “Invaluable Gonorrhoea Mixture” placed by Memphis druggists Booth and Christian, may indicate a continued demand among flatboat men and other travelers for a cure for sexually transmitted diseases contracted in Memphis. Over the following decade, however, scarcely any reference can be found in the city's newspapers to organized prostitution. Memphians began to think largely of one thing during the 1840s: cotton.<sup>62</sup>

Memphis rapidly developed into a major inland cotton center, shipping 130,000 bales by the middle of the 1840s. By the beginning of the 1850s, Memphis shipped over seven million dollars' worth of cotton a year. A few questionable roads, dirt, corduroy, and plank connected the town to the backcountry plantations of Tennessee and Mississippi, making it a convenient site for planters to ship their produce south to New Orleans. The population of the tiny burg quadrupled during the period as the city attracted laborers, merchants and cotton factors. Many men had been drawn west seeking employment in digging canals in earlier decades, but the proliferation of railroads as well as a demand for the construction of levees in Mississippi, brought still more westward. Making their way down the Ohio River through the cities of Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and Louisville, many residents of Memphis hailed from locales such as Ohio, Indiana and New York, while others came from the states of the Southeast. The scarcity of labor in frontier towns made wages higher for laborers, and at least until the railroads arrived, the getting was good. The

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<sup>62</sup> Roger Biles, *Memphis in the Great Depression* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), 10; S.R. Bruesch, “Early Medical History of Memphis, 1819-1861,” *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* 2 (1948), 49.

proliferation of steamboats also swelled the city with working class immigrants from Ireland, as well as a sizable number of middle class Germans.<sup>63</sup>

What had been a small collection of cabins in the 1820s became the fastest growing city in the nation in the 1850s. Memphis underwent a transformation from a sleepy town to a city of fast bachelors. A visitor to Memphis in 1859 remarked that the city “can boast of more banks and bachelors than any other city in the Union of its size. I am told there are twenty bachelors to one young lady.” An often overlooked aspect of Memphis prior to the Civil War is its disproportionate ratio of men to women; by 1860 there stood an imbalance of 11,350 free males to 7,589 free females. Free adult males made up sixty-eight percent of the population of the first ward. The lack of women in Memphis meant fewer families; fewer families meant that many men looked to other forms of socialization, group affiliation, and entertainment.<sup>64</sup>

As Memphis encountered its first substantial growth spurt the demand for male entertainments, including sexual services, increased. This developed largely due to the influx of immigrant working class men, but also men of middling and elite origins seeking an escape from increasingly feminine home spaces. The boarding houses, saloons and coffee houses of the city thronged with laborers, mechanics and clerks, a new reality that decisively shaped the culture of male entertainment and vice the town developed over the course of the next decade.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Scott Holzer, *Brawling on the Bluff*, 15-16, 87-88.

<sup>64</sup> Lillian Foster, *Way-Side Glimpses, North and South* (New York: 1859), 175; Scott Holzer, *Brawling*, 166. The question of whether this imbalanced sex ratio promoted same-sex relationships is difficult to answer. I have located only two reference to sexual encounters between men in Memphis, both from 1877. See *Public Ledger*, August 4, October 15, 1877.

<sup>65</sup> Timothy Gilfoyle connects the rise of prostitution in New York to the growing anonymity of the streets, the inability of working class men to afford marriage, and male resentment of the growing power of women within marriage. A similar situation existed in Memphis. In addition, working class men in Memphis remained more strongly connected to preindustrial modes of male behavior such as drinking, carousing, gaming, and visiting prostitutes. Paul Faler refers to these men as “Traditionalists,” those who were more concerned with the social world of the streets, and what Richard Stott refers to as “jolly behavior,” than middle-class and evangelical modes of deportment. See Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 111, 363, n. 51; Paul Faler, “Cultural Aspects of the Industrial Revolution: Lynn, Massachusetts, Shoemakers and Industrial Morality, 1826-1860,” *Labor History* 3 (1974), 367-394; Richard Stott, *Jolly Fellows: Male Milieus in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: The Johns

The center of male life in Memphis became the saloon, the gambling hall, and the brothel, rather than the home or the boarding house. The city center of Memphis became a masculine landscape dotted with fifty-six coffee houses and saloons in 1856 and eighty saloons by 1859. By 1860 Memphis boasted one saloon for every 125 men. These numbers do not include the dozens of grocery stores that doubled as lower class barrooms, or the restaurants where customers ate oysters and sipped lager beer. “Coffee houses,” which served as a polite euphemism for saloons in the mid-1850s Memphis directories, used prostitutes to entice customers through their doors. Waitresses, referred to as “beer jerkers” or “waiter girls” invited men up to rooms above saloons and restaurants for a small fee. A number of saloons doubled as places of entertainment, such as the “Metropolitan” bowling saloon at 221 Main, or Free & Dye's “Banjo Hall” at 157 Main; these provided locales for lower class prostitutes to mingle with men and solicit customers. These spaces, which provided amusement for working class, middling and even elite men, served as the primary sites of prostitution in the mid-1850s.<sup>66</sup>

Memphis also had two theaters by 1857, Crisp's Gaiety and Ash's Memphis Theater. Men flocked to theaters such as these not only to see a famous danseuse, but to carouse and mingle with each other and the opposite sex. Nineteenth century theaters did not cater exclusively to highbrow audiences; boisterous working class crowds filled the third tier seating of theaters to see not only minstrels and variety shows, but also works by Shakespeare. In cities from New York to New Orleans, sex workers also frequented theaters seeking customers as well as amusement. Because of the patrons they attracted to theaters, some establishments admitted prostitutes for free. Prostitutes and their gallants sat in the gallery or “third tier” of theatrical

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Hopkins University Press, 2009), 1-3.

<sup>66</sup> These numbers are taken from Rainey, *1855-1856 Memphis Directory*, Tanner, *1859 Memphis Directory*, and Holzer, *Brawling*, 177; George Boro, *Memphis Police Blotter*, December 15, 1858, Shelby County Archives (SCA); Tanner, *1859 Memphis Directory*, 218.



establishments. A writer for the *Appeal* commented that “no respectable woman will visit a place of amusement in which indecent jests are bandied about between the third tier and the pit.”<sup>67</sup>

Crisp's Gaiety, which stood on Jefferson Street in the central business district of town, featured floor seating for seventy-five cents, a “family circle” on the balcony for fifty cents, and two segregated white and colored galleries for twenty-five cents. The upper galleries had separate entrances that shielded respectable white patrons from the sight of lewd women, uncouth working class immigrants, and free people of color. Even though the gallery could be a rowdy place, the *Appeal* commented that “it is a remarkable fact that the outcast representatives of our population always conduct themselves with the utmost circumspection at theatrical entertainments.” Though segregated from each other, more respectable men would call out to attractive young women in the upper tier to solicit them. Later, as the sex trade became more established in Memphis, higher class courtesans, accompanied by elite gallants of the city's *jeunesse dorée*, infiltrated the more respectable seating. Well into the latter part of the century, respectable women complained of being “insulted” by the presence of prostitutes at the city's theaters.<sup>68</sup>

Even though W.H. Crisp, the operator of the Gaiety, segregated respectable and plebeian customers, he catered primarily to a rowdy, drunken, male clientele. In 1858, Crisp established a groggery that retailed liquor on the landing outside of the box entrances. Respectable customers expressed outrage over the change. An angry editorial in the *Appeal* addressed the concerns of female customers:

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<sup>67</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Harvard University Press, 1988), 24; Meredith Henne Baker, *The Richmond Theater Fire: Early America's First Great Disaster* (Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 130; *Memphis Appeal*, January 23, 1871, pg. 3.

<sup>68</sup> *Appeal*, November 3, 1857, pg. 2; December 7, 1858, pg 3; October 5, 1873, December 21, 1880; *Public Ledger*, December 15, 1880; Crisp's Gaiety, managed by W.H. Crisp, was the first purpose-built theater in Memphis and cost \$40,000.

There, within the theatre building itself, liquor is retailed, and its disagreeable and abominable adjuncts disgrace the walls of a building raised to encourage rational amusement, free from the degrading accompaniments too often found connected with it in other cities . . . . [T]he theatre has hitherto been well attended by the ladies, but while the grocery is in operation, their countenance must be withdrawn, and no lady can subject herself to the insulting possibilities that may arise from the proximity of the doors, by which they enter and leave the boxes, and those by which the liquor drinkers pass out of the grocery, where they obtain their supply of intoxicating drink.

The theaters of Memphis remained a battleground throughout the nineteenth century. A small but vocal group of middle-class theater-goers and progressive owners struggled to cleanse these spaces of disreputable elements, but between the late 1850s and the end of the Civil War, the city's theaters became increasingly rowdy, male-dominated, and infested with courtesans.<sup>69</sup>

An established male subculture of sporting men, what historian Richard Stott refers to as “jolly fellows,” contributed to the development of the sex trade in Memphis. The “jolly fellow” had roots in the pre-capitalist order; he brawled, drank heavily and played practical jokes. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the Second Great Awakening and the temperance movement established new norms of male behavior, stigmatizing the traditional “jolly fellow” as unsuited to the needs of the new market economy. In the Northeast, the middle-class ideal of male behavior as defined by self-control, hard work and respectability, successfully effected a “moral revolution” in male comportment. But the disappearance of these more traditional modes of male conviviality over the course of the twentieth century occurred unevenly, not occurring in the South and West until much later. The “jolly fellow” persisted in Memphis until well into the late nineteenth century. The persistence of these men, whom Paul Faler calls “traditionalists,” played a decisive role in shaping the social landscape of Memphis.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *Appeal*, October 28, 1858.

<sup>70</sup> Stott, *Jolly Fellows*, 1-3; Faler, “Cultural Aspects.”

Memphis, like other antebellum cities, had its share of young men popularly known as “b’hoys,” a slang term that referred to young sporting men who often worked for volunteer fire companies and pursued urban entertainments. B’hoys typically came from the working class, although elite young men consciously adopted the mien of their social inferiors out of a regard for their masculinity and braggadocio. The stereotypical b’hoys wore suspenders, polished boots, and a plug hat over his “soaplocked” hair, with a cigar clinched defiantly between his teeth. The image of the b’hoys had been popularized by Benjamin Baker’s play *A Glance At New York*, which told the story of a brawling volunteer firefighter named Mose. Baker’s play opened to large audiences in Memphis in 1855 and caused a sensation in the city. A critic described the Memphis performance of Frank Chanfrau, the actor who popularized the figure of Mose, as “inimitable” and second to no other actor in the country. An icon of the rowdy young men who frequented the theaters, saloons and brothels of the antebellum America, b’hoys stood out as the opposite of the sober middle class man then being promoted by bourgeois reformers. Unlike the Jeffersonian artisan who defined himself by his craft or the middle class professional defined by his career, the b’hoys’ identity came from his participation in a youth culture of commercial entertainments. Along with the rowdy flatboat and steamboat men typified by figures such as Mike Fink, Memphis had more than its share of “jolly fellows” in the years prior to the Civil War.<sup>71</sup>

Volunteer fire companies also played an important role in male socialization and facilitated the development of masculine amusements and commercialized sex. Memphis had seven volunteer fire companies in the late 1850s, with a membership of approximately 700 members. Fire companies offered working class men prestige in the community as protectors of the city’s residents from the constant threat of conflagration. Exempt from the poll tax and from

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<sup>71</sup> Stott, *Jolly Fellows*, 103-109.

serving on juries, volunteers could also count on the Fireman's Relief Association to help provide for them and their families if ever maimed or killed. Fire companies also gave working class men a sense of belonging. Station houses became places of socialization and conviviality; the upper halls of fire stations, which could be lavishly decorated, served as the site of balls, parties and communal meals. Fireman's balls and dances became particularly rowdy affairs. Firemen often brought women of "bad repute" as guests to balls prior to the Civil War.<sup>72</sup>

By 1854 brothels began to appear in the center of town, operating openly in defiance of the law. Prostitutes paraded in the light of day on Court Square, an open park-like area at the center of the city. A small cabin in the center of Court Square had variously been used as a church by several denominations, and by the early 1830s been converted into a school taught by Eugene Mageveny. An alley on Court Street, to the east of the square, became a "nest of nice ladies of color and pleasure" whose activities became "an outcrying nuisance upon the decency of the surrounding locality." Children passing by the alley on their way to and from school could observe the women calling to men from the street corner. In addition, the brothel stood next to a congregation of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. In light of these facts, the *Appeal* denounced the brothel as a "most unblushing, loathsome and disgusting set, which should be suppressed." The Court Street brothel drew public condemnation not only for its proximity to a school, but primarily because of the race of the sex workers who lived there. Many Memphians believed that free blacks harmed the community, largely because they allegedly supported themselves through crime and prostitution. In a letter to the editor from 1856, a "Citizen" noted that a free black acquaintance of his ran with "disreputable white men" and that his activities included an involvement in prostitution: "He plays the pimp, the spy, the emissary in all

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<sup>72</sup> Holzer, *Brawling*, 161-165.

intrigues, and sometimes loans his special friends a little money. He receives, perhaps, stolen goods; waits on women of easy virtue, who may be seen about his residence at all hours of the night.” Some free men and women of color did support themselves through prostitution, but largely because their options had been limited by a society which sought to keep them enslaved.<sup>73</sup>

Only a handful of free blacks lived in Memphis in 1850. Most free black men worked as barbers, laborers, dyers or shoemakers, while others worked as roustabouts and draymen. Only nine free women of color lived in the third and fourth wards of the city, the wards which embraced the area around Court Square. None of the nine women have occupations listed in the 1850 census, although many of them appear to have been servants. The free women of color Margaret Andrews and Ann Brown lived next door to each other in the city's fourth ward. In their early to mid-20s and with four children under the age of ten between them, prostitution may have offered the best means of survival. Brown received at least one charge for “entertaining slaves,” an offense which could indicate any number of activities. It might include having enslaved relatives in her home but does not exclude the possibility that she accepted money and goods from enslaved men for sexual services. These women fit the profile of those who would have sold sexual services, but since complete police records for this period do not exist, there is no way of knowing for certain. What became of the Court Street brothel is unknown.<sup>74</sup>

A comparatively small number of enslaved women and free women of color engaged in sex work in Memphis. This stands in contrast to the popular image of the peculiar institution held

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<sup>73</sup> *Appeal*, December 3, 1854; Phillip Kenneth Seidman, *The Man Who Likes Memphis: A Memoir of Forty Years Passed By* (Carnation Press, 1975), 36; Beverly Bond, Janann Sherman, *Memphis in Black and White*, 40; Beverly Bond, “Milly Swan Price: Freedom, Kinship, and Property” in Sarah Wilkerson Freeman and Beverly Greene Bond, eds., *Tennessee Women: Their Lives and Times* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 58.

<sup>74</sup> 1850 U.S. Census, Schedule of Free Inhabitants, third and fourth ward, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee; Memphis Recorder Docket, November 2, 1860, SCA.

by whites in both the South and North. In the popular imagination of the South, black women naturally preferred promiscuous sexual activity; this gave rise to the notion of the “black harlot.” In the popular imagination of the North, particularly of abolitionists, the South appeared one great brothel in which masters ruled over vast harems of slave women. Sexual relationships between masters and slaves did exist, but the debauched image depicted by sectional apologists does not hold water. In the antebellum South, white men, particularly slaveholders, had easy sexual access to enslaved women. In many cases rape and brutality defined the sexual relationships which existed between masters and slaves. In others, relationships reflected the ambiguous emotions and negotiation inherent in the system of slavery. Sexual relationships based on mutual ties of affection existed, but these did not constitute the majority of relationships. Whether desired or not, in some instances sexual relationships presented enslaved women with a means to secure favors and even freedom from their masters. A relationship with one's master could also mean harsher treatment, particularly at the hands of an angry mistress.<sup>75</sup>

It had been assumed by pro-slavery thinkers that the easy access white men had to enslaved women tended to place Southern white women on a pedestal. Pro-slavery ideologues argued that enslaved women and free women of color made up the majority of Southern prostitutes, which eliminated the demand for white prostitutes. Thus, pro-slavery ideologues believed, had the effect of elevating the Southern white woman above her Northern cousin. In this vein, William Gilmore Simms argued that prostitution in the South did not “debase the civilized, as is the case with prostitution at the North,” where white women made up the vast

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<sup>75</sup> Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2009), 38. For more on white conceptions of black women's libidinous proclivities, see Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?* 28-31; Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). For an overview of race mixing among elite planters and in urban areas, see Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* 413-431; Joshua D. Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families Across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

majority of prostitutes. In instances in which white women did engage in prostitution, pro-slavery thinkers charged, they hailed from states outside of the South. To refute this point, historians have pointed to data from 1860 Nashville, in which women of color made up only 4.3 percent of the city's 207 sex workers. Of the 198 white women who worked in prostitution in Nashville, three out of five hailed from the South. These figures would seem to refute arguments put forth by the advocates of slavery.<sup>76</sup>

Determining just how many women of color may have participated in the sex trade, however, presents more difficulties than measuring white women. This results from of the archives themselves, which tend to ignore women of color, but also the assumption on the part of many Southern whites that black women inclined to prostitution by nature. In addition, black women who engaged in prostitution appear to have primarily done so on an informal basis, working as streetwalkers and inviting men up to their rooms in boarding houses. This kind of prostitution more easily escaped the notice of law enforcement or census takers and leaves little historical traces. Only one black woman is known to have been arrested for engaging in prostitution prior to the Civil War. While locals may have worried about the moral effect of black prostitutes in their midst, race-mixing remained their primary concern. This can be seen in the city papers, in which stories addressing interracial prostitution appeared under the headline “Amalgamation.” When arrested for engaging in a clandestine liaison, free woman of color Melinda Burnett and William Grasley received a fine of ten dollars for violating anti-miscegenation laws, not for violating any of the city's statutes regulating prostitution. The “nice ladies of color and pleasure” who occupied Court Square outraged public scruples more so on

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<sup>76</sup> William Gilmore Simms, “The Morals of Slavery” in *The Pro-Slavery Argument* (Philadelphia, 1853), 230; Herbert Gutman, *Slavery and the Numbers Game: A Critique of Time on the Cross* (University of Illinois Press, 2003), 157-159.

account of their color and the color of their customers.<sup>77</sup>

As a result of this focus on policing racial boundaries, determining the extent of how many free black men or enslaved men may have frequented black prostitutes is impossible to determine. Authorities simply did not police such behavior. Authorities sought instead to police the racial boundaries between whites and blacks, a policy which fell more heavily on black women, particularly the enslaved. Maria, “a slave of Mr. Cooper,” received thirty-nine lashes for “cohabiting” in a state of “practical amalgamation” with a white man in 1860. Even though men were not subject to violence if discovered with black women, they did receive public scorn. Opprobrium often fell more on white men who engaged the services of black sex workers rather than on those who engaged the services of white prostitutes. The papers rarely published the names of men arrested for soliciting white prostitutes, but men discovered with black women usually had their names published as a means of establishing their infamy. The *Argus* noted that C.R. Brown came before the recorder twice for “living with a mulatto woman,” while J.W. Sayers received a twenty-five dollar fine for “spending the night in lodgings” occupied by an unnamed “negress.” In 1861, two police officers received word that a white man occupied a room with a black woman in a boarding house on Beale Street. Before he could be captured and identified, the man fled from the police, leaving his coat and vest behind. This may indicate a fear of being discovered and having interracial predilections made public. Elite men rarely faced exposure to public scorn for crossing the color line. When the police raided a colored house of ill-fame, the *Appeal* commented, “gentlemen, your names are omitted, but hereafter take care.”

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<sup>77</sup> Memphis Recorder Docket, February 10, 1862, SCA; “Practical Amalgamation,” *Argus*, Friday, October 19, 1860, “Amalgamatical,” *Appeal*, March 10, 1861. Mary Ann Shaw is the only black woman known to have been arrested for engaging in prostitution prior to the Civil War. There may have been others, such as those on Court Square, but no records have been found. Most frequently, black women engaging in prostitution faced arrest and fine for “amalgamation” or sex across the color line.



This suggests that men of quality may have been among those rounded up.<sup>78</sup>

Only a handful of free black women worked as prostitutes in the late 1850s. Mary Ann Shaw, formerly slave of George Dixon, a Memphis attorney, turned to prostitution as a means of support. At some point between 1859 and 1861, Shaw received her freedom. Historian Beverley Bond found evidence that Shaw married one of the slaves of William Richardson Hunt and lived in their household, but by 1861 Shaw established a residence on the Overton tract, a parcel of land on the southern outskirts of the city. Shaw did not have “the good fortune to stand high in the estimation of her neighbors,” and in 1861 the city recorder charged her with retailing liquor without a license, keeping a house of ill-fame, and entertaining slaves on her property. Shaw is the only black woman known to have been explicitly charged with keeping a house of prostitution in Memphis before the Civil War. The city attorney lacked sufficient evidence to convict her of keeping a bawdyhouse and retailing liquor without a license, but she did receive a fine of two dollars for entertaining slaves.<sup>79</sup>

Another comparatively prosperous free woman of color, Melinda Burnett, lived with her siblings and her infant daughter. Burnett, like other working class women, supported herself through informal prostitution. In the late 1850s and early 1860s she received charges of disorderly conduct as well as engaging in sexual relations with a white man named William Grasley. However, prostitution did not serve as the primary source of income for either of these women, as indicated by their licenses to run drays. Running a wagon may have enabled them to make income taking produce to market or carrying goods for others. Prostitution most likely served as a temporary survival mechanism during periods when work or income became

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<sup>78</sup> Appeal, February 27, October 22, 1861; Memphis Daily Argus, October 19, 1860, February 14, 27, March 10, 1861, November 19, 1878.

<sup>79</sup> Hunt, *Tennessee Women*, 52-53; *Appeal*, March 9, 1861

scarce.<sup>80</sup>

Records for the period between 1854 and 1857 indicate prostitution in Memphis operated at a small, unorganized level. Only five individuals came before the city recorder in 1856 for operating houses of ill-fame or renting to prostitutes. All of these individuals lived in the city's southern suburbs, specifically the sixth ward and the small community of Fort Pickering, which stood just outside the city limits. Between 1850 and 1860 this area developed into a residential neighborhood of petty bourgeoisie and skilled, upwardly mobile members of the working class. In this neighborhood, bounded by Beale Street on the north, Calhoun Street to the south and the Mississippi River to the west, prominent native-born merchants and physicians lived alongside immigrant artisans and small shop owners. Some prostitutes worked as servants or chambermaids during the daylight hours in the homes of the sixth ward, such as twenty-five year old Kate Gallagher, who worked in the home of T.H. Judson, or the twenty-four year old Irish immigrant Bridget Hayden, a servant in the home of C.M. Farmer on Main Street, between Huling and Trezevant. By night Bridget kept her lodgings as a place of assignation. Nearby lived a woman named Margaret Hayden, presumably a sister, who also kept a house of prostitution with three other women, including a Mollie Hayden. In April of 1856, William Hayden came before the recorder on a charge of allowing a "woman of ill-fame" to occupy his house, which may indicate that prostitution became a family affair for some immigrants.<sup>81</sup>

Domestics came to be popularly associated with prostitution in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. An observer remarked that a "virtuous chambermaid is as hard to find as a pulse in a potato." This stereotype developed in part because domestics worked in close quarters

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<sup>80</sup> Memphis Recorder Docket, February 10, 1862, SCA; Hunt, *Tennessee Women*, 52-53.

<sup>81</sup> 1855-56 Recorder Docket, April 25, May 9, 16, July 3, 1856, SCA; 1860 U.S. Census, Schedule of Free Inhabitants, Sixth Ward, Memphis, Shelby County Tennessee, 144, 151.

with their employers in private settings, but also because they received little pay. A New York sporting journal remarked that the “consequence of their low wages is, that she gets money by the only means in her power, and is not nice about her lovers.” Such journals jokingly advised married men never to hire attractive, young servant girls, but rather “ugly and old; forty five, at least,” as a precaution against ruining marriages. In language that played upon class and ethnic stereotypes, journals depicted chambermaids not as naturally more amorous, but simply ignorant and vain women willing to sell themselves for money, baubles, or favors. Female servants sometimes went from unofficially offering sexual services on the side to working exclusively as sex workers. Others drifted in and out of the two worlds, selling their bodies when times became tough, and then returning to more “honest” work.<sup>82</sup>

Domestic servant and part-time sex worker Bridget Hayden may have known G.P. Foute, an attorney and later city alderman for the sixth ward. The two may have been aware of each other, since Hayden's employer lived around the corner from Foute in the late 1850s. But their paths may have also crossed in the underworld of commercial sex. Apart from Foute's public life as an attorney and local politician, he also kept unsavory associations. In 1856, the city attorney charged Foute with “suffering lewd women to occupy his home.” It may have been that Foute, like other Memphians seeking to profit from a lucrative trade in sex, rented part of his home to prostitutes. Foute, however, lived with his wife and two children, which makes it rather unlikely he would have rented his home to sex workers. It is quite possible that Foute may have rented another property in town to sex workers. Foute owned other lots in the city, which he may have rented out as dwelling spaces. The women in question may have worked as his servants, women

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<sup>82</sup> Cline, *Flash Press*, 162-163; Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, “Another 'American Cruikshank' Found: John H. Manning and the New York Sporting Weeklies,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 112 (2004), 93-126.

like Bridget Hayden, who sold sexual services on the side. If Foute had in fact rented property to women of ill-fame it would not be unusual; many elite Memphians knowingly rented to madams and sex workers in the coming years. When brought before the city recorder, Foute received only an admonition and agreed to remove the women from his property.<sup>83</sup>

The completion of the Memphis and Charleston Railroad in 1857 constituted a watershed year in the development of the Memphis sex trade. Since the 1840s, Memphis railroad boosters worked tirelessly to ensure the Bluff City developed into a bustling western commercial center. Boosters argued that railroads would secure the economic future of Memphis, ensuring the city would remain the preeminent inland cotton shipping center. The efforts of boosters such as Robertson Topp and J.T. Trezevant bore fruit in 1857 with the completion of the Memphis and Charleston railroad, which connected Memphis to Charleston for the first time by rail. A Charleston fire company celebrated the completion with the ceremonial spraying of Atlantic Ocean water, which had been specially brought by rail, into the Mississippi River. The Mississippi and Tennessee railroad, also under construction at the time, later connected Memphis to the cotton lands of the delta. The Memphis and Ohio line, completed by 1860, connected the Bluff City to Louisville and the larger cities of the Midwest and Northeast. The completion of these railroads saved the city from obscurity, but at the same time ensured the emergence of a shadow sex economy. These roads increased the flow of goods and manufactures, but also the flow of people. The population of Memphis almost tripled between 1850 and 1860, from 8,841 to 22,623.<sup>84</sup>

With the trains came thousands of men and women seeking work. The promise of earning

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<sup>83</sup> 1855-56 Memphis Recorder Docket, SCA; During the debates in 1858 over the regulation of prostitution, Foute, then as alderman, argued that prostitutes should be given “some protection” by the authorities.

<sup>84</sup> Holzer, *Brawling*, 64-65, 81; Holzer's first chapter is an in-depth account railroad boosterism in Memphis, 14-86.

higher wages than in the more populous cities of the North and East attracted scores of laborers. Memphis became the fastest growing city in the United States. Boosters of Southern white labor claimed Memphis promised higher wages than many cities in the North, making between fifty cents to one dollar more a day in some cases. Andrew Johnson extolled the virtues of free labor in the South, arguing on the floor of the Senate that a bricklayer in Memphis made from two to three dollars a day, while a bricklayer in Bangor, Maine made only fifty cents to two dollars. Johnson did not grossly over-inflate his figures: in 1857, journeyman bricklayers in Memphis made three dollars a day and in September of that year went on strike for three dollars and fifty cents an hour. Memphis stonecutters brought in approximately fifty dollars per month, while other skilled laborers such as carpenters made close to forty dollars. Labor scarcity in growing frontier towns like Memphis, where most slave labor remained tied to agriculture, made for better wages for white workers than in the glutted labor markets of the Northeast, at least for a time. But Johnson's view, like that of many proslavery ideologists, rested on the presupposition that slave labor would remain predominantly in the agricultural sector. Memphis had a slave population in excess of 3,000 in 1860, a number comparatively small for a southern city. Despite the relatively small size of the slave population, bondsmen competed with skilled and unskilled white laborers for work, which bred antagonism between the two groups.<sup>85</sup>

Johnson's speech made no mention of jobs open to women in Memphis, or anywhere in the United States for that matter. White women, relegated to domestic work, faced even greater competition from slaves and free people of color. Many women could find work only as maids or domestic servants, a tenuous form of employment in a society which preferred black servile labor. A hired free woman of color or slave could just as easily clean, mend clothing or take care

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 92-95.

of children as a white servant. Those who could not find work as a domestic worked as laundresses or dressmakers, forms of employment which faced almost unlimited competition from other black and white women. Some women who worked in sewing or mending clothes turned to prostitution to supplement their meager incomes. The city attorney charged one such woman, Mary Schutzler, who lived at Main near Madison and gave her occupation as “dressmaker,” with operating a house of ill-fame and disorderly conduct in 1857.<sup>86</sup>

Married women in Memphis performed the essential but quotidian work necessary for households and small businesses, work that did not simply keep the household neat and provide comfort for husbands and children, but added valuable income. Many families ran small businesses on the side, such as small boarding houses, doggeries (low saloons), restaurants or groceries. Economic necessity or the death of a husband led to an adoption of sex work by some married women. A family boarding house could easily take in sex workers as tenants or be converted completely into a brothel. A significant number of women arrested for renting to prostitutes or working as sex workers came from situations in which husbands had died or abandoned them. Mary Williams, known as “Big Mary” ran a boarding house that also doubled as a doggery. By 1858 Williams, who had been widowed a whopping six times, converted her boarding house into a place of assignation, while continuing to serve whiskey and rent rooms to male boarders.<sup>87</sup>

Even in the few areas where women might be employed in manufacturing, employers preferred more pliant slave labor. The Memphis Manufacturing Company preferred to employ slaves in textile spinning. The proprietors considered slaves more pliant than unskilled white

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<sup>86</sup> Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery*, 3; Holzer, *Brawling*, 103-106.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 103; Prior to the Civil War, madams such as Mary A. Miller and Rosalie Pavid were widows; *Appeal*, December 18, 1857, October 31, December 15, 1861.

operatives. Other companies such as Bluff City Mills employed roughly sixty employees, mostly women. Their wages, at thirty cents a day, fell well below the typical pay for an unskilled white laborer. The difficulty of securing employment raised the very real possibility of falling into prostitution in order to survive. A sudden change in life circumstances: widowhood, single motherhood, divorce – these all pushed women into a situation where they might lack the means to survive. With such difficulties in securing steady employment that offered a decent wage, it should come as no surprise that an increasing number of Memphis women turned to sex work in the late 1850s.<sup>88</sup>

Between 1857 and 1860, the number of prostitutes in Memphis increased dramatically. Prostitution not only offered better wages than most work open to women, for some it promised better income than available to many unskilled male laborers. Women working low “crib” brothels in New Orleans brought in twenty-five to thirty dollars a month. With less competition, a lowly Memphis streetwalker likely brought in just as much monthly, while women employed in parlor houses made double that. A sizable minority of women, professional sex workers from larger cities in the northeast and south, also came to Memphis seeking a market with less competition and fewer legal restrictions. Many of the madams who operated in Memphis were women of means from the cities the Ohio Valley and the Northeast, suggesting they had started their careers in sex work elsewhere. Between 1857 and 1861, the number of prostitutes operating in Memphis grew to approximately 130, a ratio of roughly one for every ninety males, or one for every sixty males over the age of sixteen. This figure is derived largely from women who worked in brothels. Streetwalkers or women who engaged in informal prostitution would at least double that number, but locating them in documents presents great difficulties. Hundreds of women

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<sup>88</sup> Holzer, *Brawling*, 92-93, 107.

appear in police records on charges of disorderly conduct, drunkenness, and fighting in the late 1850s, and many of these likely worked the streets, landing, and dives.<sup>89</sup>

Twelve brothels have been identified as operating in Memphis by 1860, which ranged in size from two to twelve women. Most sex workers established themselves in the fifth and sixth wards, an area toward the southern end of the city frequented by boatmen, working class laborers, clerks, and travelers. Others set up shop in the built-up area of the city center, taking advantage of proximity to the entertainment district surrounding the city's theaters in the first and second wards. More exclusive establishments sprang up near the financial and governmental heart of the city, or in the wealthy suburbs, where sex workers mingled with professionals, planters, and politicians.<sup>90</sup>

Madams made wise business decisions in selecting locations with heavy amounts of boat, rail and foot traffic. Proximity to the landing and railroad stations proved important for maintaining a steady stream of clients. A traveler disembarking from a steamboat at the foot of Monroe Avenue in 1860 would have encountered a “drummer,” or procurer, who steered men to houses of prostitution. Young men who worked for mercantile firms, drummers escorted out-of-town merchants to brothels and gambling dens as a way of “drumming” up business for their companies. Some drummers worked directly for brothels, extolling the pleasures of the houses that employed them.

A drummer might have directed a traveler to the brothel on the corner of Front and Monroe operated by twenty-four year old Elizabeth Whifers. The proprietress was in all

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<sup>89</sup> Judith Kelleher Schafer, *Brothels*, 12,124; The figures here regarding the size of the prostitute population are taken from the 1860 U.S. Census, Population Schedule, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee; The Memphis Recorder Docket for the period from 1856 to 1863 is filled with arrests of women on charges of vagrancy, disorderly conduct, drunkenness, and fighting.

<sup>90</sup> These twelve brothels were located in the 1860 U.S. Census, Population Schedule, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee, through names found in newspaper stories and arrests in the Memphis Recorder Docket, 1857-1863, SCA.



likelihood a professional sex worker who had established her reputation elsewhere. Not many prostitutes possessed the hard-boiled determination required to establish their own brothel by the age of twenty-four, but Whilters did. Her background unknown, Whilters may have moved to Memphis from Nashville, St. Louis or Louisville seeking a new market. Lavishly decorated in mahogany furniture and velvet carpeting, her establishment housed twelve women between the ages of 18 and 30, including two free women of color who worked as servants. Whilters also owned four slaves, employing two in driving hacks. The décor, as well as the ability to employ servants, indicates the profitability of prostitution for madams like Whilters, who possessed a personal estate worth \$5,000.<sup>91</sup>

Heading south down Front Row, past a multitude of saloons and merchant houses, a traveler would come to Gayoso Avenue, which ran along the north side of the city's preeminent hotel, the Gayoso House. A number of brothels of varied descriptions clustered around the hotel to take advantage of the businessmen and planters who haunted the rooms and lounges of the Gayoso, but also rough boatmen and roustabouts. Making a left down Gayoso Avenue and passing near to where a bridge crossed the bayou Gayoso, stood the brothels of Emma Piquet (or Pickett) and Puss Pettus. The bagnio operated by Piquet offered close to a dozen women for a customer's perusal. In a rococo parlor decorated with damask curtains and marble-topped tables, the women lounged in tete-a-tete chairs and sipped champagne. Little is known of Piquet herself, except that she rented her property from W.R. Hunt, one of the wealthiest members of the Memphis aristocracy.<sup>92</sup>

Travelers disembarking from the Mississippi and Tennessee Railroad depot at the corner

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<sup>91</sup> Cline, *Flash Press*, 266 n. 48; 1860 U.S. Census, Population Schedule, Memphis, Fifth Ward, Shelby County, Tennessee, pg. 53; 1860 U.S. Census, Slave Schedule, Memphis, Fifth Ward, Shelby County, Tennessee, pg. 5.

<sup>92</sup> 1860 U.S. Census, Population Schedule, Memphis, Fifth Ward, Shelby County, Tennessee, 76; Emma Pequet to Phil T. Allen, Deed of Trust, book 44, pg. 49, SCA.

of Main and Calhoun, just outside the southern city limits, also immediately encountered houses of prostitution. A rail passenger leaving the station saw the dilapidated, overgrown Morris Cemetery, just to the north. On the far east side of the cemetery stood three houses with signs that publicly advertised boarding, but made their profits from sex and alcohol. These lower class brothels could count less on the protection of elite men, hence a greater need for deception. One, kept by French immigrant Louisa Morris or “French Lou,” boarded seven women, including one employed as a servant. Rosalie Pavid immigrated to the United States in 1850 from France with her brother. She married a man in Memphis, but shortly thereafter he either died or abandoned her. Pavid adopted the working name “French Lou” and worked her way up through the violent, hardscrabble world of prostitution to establish her own brothel by the age of twenty-nine, an establishment she ran with a stern hand. Immediately next door stood Margaret Hayden's house of ill-fame, which boarded four others. Two doors down stood a boarding house kept by Jone Mitchell that may have also been a brothel. These establishments catered to working class men and rail travelers and faced higher levels of violence from customers, police, and angry local residents.<sup>93</sup>

While brothels on the South side catered to a rougher crowd, establishments in the second ward catered to a more genteel customer base. There, two brothels stood side by side on Front Row, near the Cotton Exchange Building. The Cotton Exchange housed not only an array of merchants, but also the offices of the mayor and the city council. The proximity of these houses of ill-fame to where men transacted the affairs of government was not coincidental. More than one city alderman became involved with prostitutes, both sexually and financially. Helen

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<sup>93</sup> 1860 U.S. Census, Population Schedule, Memphis, Sixth Ward, Shelby County, Tennessee, 156; *The Daily Avalanche*, September 1,3, 1858; Shelby County Marriage Docket, Rosalie Pavid to H.D. Stallings, 1854, book 1 pg. 348, SCA.

Blanche, the keeper of one of the brothels near the Exchange, hailed from New York. Like Lizzie Whilters, Blanche probably learned the tricks of the trade elsewhere, likely in the cities of the Northeast. Blanche proved herself to be one of the shrewder businesswomen in Memphis; through adroit business dealings, Blanche took charge of two Memphis brothels, reaping the profits from both.<sup>94</sup>

The suburbs north of the city also had its own sexual resort. Madam Mary A. Miller, a forty-one year old widow, established a house a mile outside of town on the New Raleigh Road, which linked Memphis with Raleigh, the county seat of Shelby County. Miller's bagnio housed nine or ten women, including at least one free woman of color who worked as a servant and a prostitute. The location catered to the sort of customer Miller sought: lawyers, government officials, and other members of the city's elite. Miller's clients also included Memphis aldermen. Her exact identity, like that of many sex workers, remains obscure. Miller appears to have been bequeathed at least one property in Memphis by her deceased husband, although there may have been multiple properties. The elite suburban neighborhood surrounding Miller's brothel featured wealthy cotton factors, merchants, physicians and upwardly mobile white collar workers. While some of these men undoubtedly patronized Miller's establishment, others looked on the house of ill-fame with disgust.<sup>95</sup>

As organized prostitution began to grow dramatically, prostitution-related arrests grew as well. Prostitution-related arrests, for the purposes of this study, indicates any woman arrested for keeping a bawdy house or being the inmate thereof, keeping a disorderly house, or streetwalking.

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<sup>94</sup> 1860 U.S. Census, Population Schedule, Second Ward, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee, 20; Mary A. Miller to Helen Blanche, lease, book 48 pg. 98, SCA; Eliza Goodrich to Helen Blanche, warranty deed, book 47, pg. 130, SCA.

<sup>95</sup> 1860 U.S. Census, Population Schedule, First Ward, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee, 54; *Appeal*, September 18, 1858; Tanner, 1859 Memphis Directory, 124.

It also indicates any known prostitute arrested for disorderly conduct or a misdemeanor. In addition, the totals include any man or woman charged with solicitation or renting their property to prostitutes. Men arrested for disorderly conduct at brothels -- often not explicitly mentioned -- or other illegal conduct in brothels has not been included in these figures. None of the Memphis Metropolitan Police docket books or recorder's court docket books for the late 1850s or early 1860s are complete. At best, some years have five or six months, others have as little as three months still extant. But with what data exists, arrests for prostitution grew steadily between 1857 and 1860. 1857 saw a modest increase in prostitution-related arrests, increasing to seven for the year. More complete data for 1858 reveals a total of nineteen arrests, most for keeping bawdy houses, disorderly conduct, or renting to prostitutes. The incomplete data for 1859, covering only the first three months of the year, totaled eight arrests. Assuming the numbers remained fairly constant, it would indicate an increase over the preceding year, or roughly thirty arrests. The extant data for 1860, which only covers the last five months of the year, totaled forty-three arrests. The data for 1861 and 1862 indicate a continued trend of growth, with arrests topping sixty in the first year of the Civil War and nearing eighty arrests for the year by 1862.<sup>96</sup>

Most arrests for keeping bawdy houses, living as inmates of bawdy houses, or streetwalking resulted in a fine for sex workers. Fines ranged from five dollars for streetwalking, ten dollars for being an inmate, and twenty to twenty-five dollars for keeping houses of prostitution. Those who failed or refused to pay received a term in the workhouse or on the chain-gang, a period ranging from as little as two days to as many as fifty-three days. Fines fell most heavily on the lower class of sex workers, such as Mary Williams, a woman termed a “drunken whore” by the police. Williams, also known as “Big Mary,” regularly came before the

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<sup>96</sup> Memphis Recorder Dockets, 1857-1863, SCA.

city recorder on a variety of charges, commonly alcohol-related. Between 1857 and 1861 Williams spent 366 days in the city workhouse, more than any other sex worker in the city. While in the workhouse, women engaged in washing or other kinds of cleaning not performed by male prisoners. But for most women, a visit to the city recorder on charges of prostitution resulted in only a small fine, which they quickly paid. Twenty-one percent of the offenses alleged to have been committed by sex workers for the period between 1857 and 1863, which includes offenses for disorderly conduct, and misdemeanors, sent women to the workhouse. Generally speaking, fines functioned as a kind of tax never intended to suppress prostitution. Prostitutes found it much easier to simply pay the fine and return to work. Within a matter of days, a brothel inmate would quickly remake the lost money. In only four instances during this period did women fail or refuse to pay the fine for keeping houses of prostitution.<sup>97</sup>

Elite landlords who lived in the suburbs or localities remote from where brothels stood eagerly rented property to madams and sex workers, often at high rents. Others, such as boarding house keepers, merchants and tradesmen struggling to attain financial security, turned to renting apartments above their establishments to prostitutes. On the low end, rent could be as low as a few dollars a week for individual boarders or women keeping rooms as places of assignation. On the high end, madams could pay as much as \$6,000 a year for the use of a fine building in the city center. Typical rents ranged from \$200 to \$1,000 per year. Between 1860 and 1900, forty individuals have been identified as having rented property to sex workers or permitted them to operate in their places of business. Of these, most worked as small merchants, lawyers, or tradesmen: five lawyers, three grocers, one blacksmith, two livery stable operators, a tailor, druggist, and three saloon operators. Wealthy gentlemen, commission merchants, manufacturers

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

or successful professionals, such as David Pante, a Prussian immigrant, also rented to sex workers. Pante ran a soap and candle factory, but he also owned \$80,000 in real estate throughout the city. On two occasions Pante came before the city recorder on charges for renting houses to women of ill-fame. Five brothel landlords during this period served as city or county officials, including the sheriff, justices of the peace, and aldermen.<sup>98</sup>

William R. Hunt, one of the first citizens of Memphis, also tapped into the sex trade as a source of income. Hunt, who lived in a stately manse on Beale Street beyond the Bayou, let a brick townhome on Gayoso to Emma Piquet. Hunt charged Piquet \$950 for the first month's rent, and thereafter only fifty dollars a month, or \$600 a year. The highly itemized lease, which explicitly mentions gambling, “disorderly conduct” and “receiv[ing] a woman or women” into the rooms sought to protect Hunt from legal action, as well as to protect the property from damage. Hunt knew the identity of his tenant, and wrote up his lease accordingly. As a result of his shrewdly worded lease, but also because of his prominent place in the city, Hunt never came before the recorder on a charge of renting to prostitutes. If a landlord's property became the object of police attention it would do no good to feign ignorance. Most individuals renting to madams would have likely known the identity of their tenants. Also, Memphis may have been growing, but it remained a small community in which news spread quickly. The character of houses became common knowledge. The soubriquet “public woman” had its root, in part, in this fact.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Rent figures are derived from a wide array of leases and probate records, including Eliza Goodrich to Helen Blanche, warranty deed, book 47, pg. 130, SCA; Mary A. Miller to Helen Blanche, lease, book 48, pg. 98, SCA; Joseph Lipari to Rose Lovejoy, lease, book 56, pg. 328, SCA; William R. Hunt to Emma Picket, lease, book 44, pg. 579, SCA; D.F. Brown to Pauline Barclay, lease, book 136, pg. 224, SCA; Emily Sutton (alias Fannie Walker) probate record, 1873-01690, SCA; Annie Cook probate record, 1878-03231, SCA; Susan Powell probate record, 1876-02631, SCA; Mattie Jackson probate record, 1880-06262, SCA; Pauline Barclay (alias Pauline Livingstone) probate record, 1880-05444, SCA; 1860 U.S. Census, Population Schedule, Eighth Ward, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee, 129; Memphis Recorder Docket, Aug. 17, 24, 1860.

<sup>99</sup> William R. Hunt to Emma Picket, lease, book 44, pg. 579, SCA; Emma Pequet to Phil T. Allen, book 44, pg.

For the localities in which brothels operated, their existence proved anything but a boon. Arrests for lewd behavior in public, riotous conduct, and most of all violence, became common in the vicinity of brothels. The police and recorder's dockets became a catalog of public obscenity in the late 1850s. The recorder charged one man for “hugging” lewd women in the street, clearly a polite euphemism for engaging in public sex acts, while another was charged for “sucking the privates of a female” within the view of a police officer. Sex workers crowded sidewalks and street corners in areas outside of brothels, theaters and saloons, using “vile language” and hurling insults at passersby. The *Appeal* reported that a group of “three or four women, and about five and twenty men, were guilty of the most outrageous blackguardism” on the corner of Second and Adams on the night of October 26, 1858. “The language of the abandoned women was especially obscene and vile to the lowest degree, and the filth that flowed from their lips was shrieked as loudly as feminine lungs could yell.” The report noted the police failed to do anything about the disturbance. The flagrant display of sex in heavily traveled public thoroughfares compelled many respectable travelers to avoid streets frequented by prostitutes. The *Appeal* lamented the “shameless proceedings of the cyprians that swarm in our streets at night, compelling modest women to remain shut up in their houses.” Sex workers who did not walk rode in carriages along Main Street in a state of intoxication, shouting and laughing loudly while stopping to pick up customers in full view of the public.<sup>100</sup>

Sex workers also associated with more serious criminal activity. Some brothels made a practice of swindling men out of money, while individual sex workers often took it upon themselves to steal from men surreptitiously. “Panel houses,” the most famous form of swindle

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609, SCA.

<sup>100</sup> Memphis Recorder Docket, January 3, 1862; Memphis Police Blotter, February 13, 1858; *Appeal*, February 2, Oct. 27, December 7, 1858.

sex workers adopted, involved rooms with hidden panels behind which an accomplice would emerge when customers were either distracted or asleep. The accomplice would then seize a billfold or gold watch and disappear behind the hidden panel. No evidence exists of panel houses in Memphis. Some Memphis brothels, however, drugged their liquor, which would reduce men to such a stupor that they could easily be robbed of their possessions, while others simply employed stout men to rob customers. Newspapers ridiculed men from the countryside swindled in this way. Although not universally practiced, many prostitutes often stole from customers and each other.<sup>101</sup>

Theft often led to violence. On account of the large amounts of alcohol consumed, explosions of violence between sex workers and customers, as well as among inmates, proved quite common. The added element of theft produced an unstable environment that often led to individuals' being seriously maimed or killed. Memphis prostitutes often lived by the same rules of savage violence and honor as embraced by working class men. Reports of fist fights and brawls among prostitutes littered the city papers. When Mary Williams and "Miss Mountain" became involved in a dispute, Williams attempted to shoot her dead. When the gun misfired, Williams pistol-whipped her rival instead. Prostitutes also fought each other regarding personal attachments to customers. When Madam Nannie McGinnis discovered that her companion, A. Hutchens, had left her for another woman, she proceeded to "take vengeance" on her rival. Hutchens, defending himself and the woman, struck McGinnis on the head with a hot iron poker, inflicting a serious injury.<sup>102</sup>

Despite periodic arrests, it became increasingly clear to Memphis residents that the police either could not or did not want to suppress prostitution. Memphians began to take extra-

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<sup>101</sup> *Appeal*, February 27, 1861; for more on panel houses, see Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 377, notes 32-34.

<sup>102</sup> *Appeal*, October 31, 1861; *Avalanche*, February 28, 1861.



legal action against brothels, particularly those which appeared in the suburbs. In early 1858 a group of “fancy ladies” established themselves in Fort Pickering, then just outside the southern boundary of Memphis. Originally established in 1801 as a military garrison, Fort Pickering later developed into a suburb and small community in its own right. The presence of the Mississippi and Tennessee Railroad made Fort Pickering an attractive location for commerce. Madams also found this locale an attractive neighborhood to conduct sexual commerce. Trainloads of “countrymen,” farmers, and planters from Mississippi visited Memphis to conduct business and enjoy the pleasures found in houses of ill-fame. In addition, laborers who worked on the railroad provided a steady stream of customers for prostitutes. Whoever these “fancy ladies” may have been, their establishment stood not far from that of Margaret Hayden, since much of the built up area in Fort Pickering clustered near the train station and depot, only a stone's throw away from the Morris Cemetery.<sup>103</sup>

Local property holders did not enjoy the presence of a brothel in their vicinity. When residents demanded the “fancy ladies” leave their community, the women refused and “entrenched themselves” along with some of their “supporters.” The identity of these supporters remains unclear, but they may have been transient working class men, gamblers, or those referred to as “vagrants.” The *Evening Ledger* simply reported “great excitement” that “business had been suspended” throughout Fort Pickering, and thirty or forty persons took part in the encounter. The language of entrenchment echoes episodes that took place along the river over twenty years previous in Vicksburg and Natchez. In 1835, a Vicksburg vigilance committee drafted a resolution demanding that all gamblers leave the city on penalty of death. A group of gamblers who barricaded themselves inside a saloon faced an assault from a group of local

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<sup>103</sup> Bond, *Memphis*, 18, 34; *Ledger*, February 18, 1858.

militia. The outburst of popular violence resulted in the death of six, including a respected local physician. Similar occurrences took place in Natchez, where in 1835 and 1840, vigilance committees drove gamblers and other undesirables out of the Under-the-Hill district. This incident also echoed what had occurred in Memphis in 1837, when angry residents burned a brothel and exiled its inmates. While the details remain obscure, what took place in Fort Pickering bore a resemblance, in its broad contours, to these early incidents. Likely the crowd compelled the “fancy ladies” to remove themselves from Fort Pickering. Although garnering very little attention in the Memphis press, it became the first spasm of a year of violence directed against “fancy women.”<sup>104</sup>

As the population of Memphis grew and the city expanded, propertied elites, professionals, and a growing middle class of white collar workers sought to remove themselves from the city center to a more spacious, quieter, and more respectable environment beyond the city limits. Elite Southerners dismissed Memphis as a place to live because the city failed “to segregate its flatboat folk and its numerous gambling dens and bawdy houses from more respectable districts.” The city had grown from a mere 8,000 free inhabitants in 1850 to over 22,000 by 1860. This number did not include slaves or the “floating population” which swelled the city's lodgings, both temporary and permanent, almost to the breaking point. The city also faced a housing crisis in the late 1850s and early 1860s. The *Appeal* repeatedly complained that little housing existed for the “poorer classes,” relegating Irish immigrants to slums like the Pinch district, which offered cramped and unsafe tenements. Evidence of the housing shortage can be seen in police arrest records for men and women arrested for “lying out” in the open air or on the levee. Many of these homeless Irish laborers worked on railroads, levees, or the steamboats, and

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.; Christopher Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch*, 27-32; Rothman, *Flush Times*, 200.

having no place to stay simply resorted to squatting in mills, sheds, or according to the keeper of the police ledger, “lying out like hogs.” Elite sex workers also sought to remove themselves from the city center to more salubrious climes. The limit of the reach of the law, as well as a housing shortage in the city center, may have influenced women such as those in Fort Pickering to locate their bawdy house there.<sup>105</sup>

Madam Mary Miller established a brothel on the New Raleigh Road, one mile northeast of town, beyond the reach of the law. By June of 1858, Miller's neighbors became quite aware that she sold sex, and interracial sex at that. Miller employed at least one black woman, who on paper may have been listed as a “servant,” but whose actual function in the brothel involved both domestic and sex work. Her bagnio also brought the crime and lower class clientele of the city into the suburbs, which threatened to undermine the property values of suburbanites and land speculators. Perhaps equally annoying to residents, Miller's brothel stood very close to the Third Presbyterian Church, as well as the Leath Orphan Asylum. In addition, elite suburban dwellers considered the presence of a brothel in their midst a threat to the integrity and virtue of their families. An anonymous Memphian angrily proclaimed in the *Appeal* that “such an outrage upon the *moral law of God*, the *dignity* of woman, the *purity* of our families, and the *morals* of our boys *will* and *cannot* be tolerated.” A committee formed to oust Miller from their midst.<sup>106</sup>

A “very large” meeting of concerned citizens gathered at the Chelsea School House on the tenth of June to discuss what should be done about the “notorious bawdy house.” The assembly appointed John H. Rawlings and Jesse Prescott president and secretary, respectively, of the meeting. Rawlings operated a brick manufactory and Prescott ran a candle and soap factory

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<sup>105</sup> Robert Alan Sigafos, *Cotton Row to Beale Street: A Business History of Memphis* (Memphis State University Press, 1979), 14; Holzer, *Brawling*, 168; Memphis Police Blotter, 1858-1860, passim.

<sup>106</sup> *Appeal*, June 11, September 18, October 22, 1858, March 10, 1861.

on Front Row. Both made their home near the New Raleigh road. Rawlings stated that the citizens had gathered “to hear the report of the committee appointed at the previous meeting to confer with the proprietress of the notorious bawdy house in that neighborhood on the subject of abating the same, and to take such further action in the premises as might appear necessary and proper.” Miller had given “verbal and written assurances,” they reported, “that she would forthwith abate the nuisance, of which purpose there had appeared some evidence during the day.” The meeting then appointed another committee composed of still more neighbors and local property holders, Y. Marley, B. Lewis, and William Badger to inspect the brothel. A suburban developer who owned numerous lots outside the city limits, Marley likely worried that the presence of a house of prostitution would scare away respectable buyers and drive down real estate values. William Badger owned a factory that produced portable mills, but he also made his home in Memphis's northeastern suburbs. The men made their way into Miller's brothel and inspected the premises, ensuring the rooms had been vacated in “good faith.” The meeting then drafted a resolution stating their intent to preserve their community from the intrusion of houses of ill-fame:

Resolved, That this community henceforth will not permit the existence and maintenance of a bawdy house within its limits, and that notice is hereby given to all persons whatsoever disposed to create or maintain such a nuisance among us, of this, our determination.

Resolved, That in order to insure our future security in this respect, a committee be appointed whose duty it shall, on the first appearance and manifestation to create such a nuisance in this community, to call a meeting of the citizens to take the matter into consideration, in order to the prompt and effective suppression of the same.

Resolved, That inasmuch as the good name of this community has suffered by reasons of the existence of the aforementioned nuisance, the city papers be requested to publish these proceedings as a public expression, of our determination to preserve and maintain the character it has heretofore otherwise sustained for good order, morality and virtue.

The resolutions amounted to a threat, albeit a veiled one. The committee worded their resolution with broad language. The committee of twenty-six appointed to ensure the enforcement of these resolutions included four manufacturers, five white collar workers, five professionals (including attorneys, physicians and bankers) and one pastor, E.E. Porter of the Third Presbyterian Church. For two months the nuisance seemed to have been abated, and no other pronouncements issued from the suburban homeowners' association.<sup>107</sup>

Miller may have cooperated with this committee with the intention of reopening her bagnio once matters quieted down. By early September Madam Miller had reopened her establishment. Within a matter of months, she quietly readmitted her boarders and began to accept customers once again. But matters took a turn for the worse in late August. John Able, a notorious gambler who over a year before had nearly been lynched by a crowd of several thousand Memphians for murder, returned to the Bluff City. Able began a relationship with Eliza Milliner, a sex worker who lived and worked in Miller's establishment. For an unknown reason, bad blood developed between Eliza Milliner and Rosalie Pavid, alias "French Lou," then another boarder with Miller. Able and Milliner, whatever their reasons, attempted to murder Rosalie Pavid at Madam Miller's brothel on September 2<sup>nd</sup>. The pair viciously stabbed Pavid, which nearly killed her. The attack angered Memphians who had lately witnessed an increase in violent crime. The *Appeal* reported that large crowds of people gathered for the trial of Milliner and Able. "This case appears to have something attractive about it to a portion of the citizens," the *Appeal* noted, "for there was a full attendance." To the dismay of advocates of law and order, a

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<sup>107</sup> *Appeal*, June 11, 1858; Professions and residences of members of this meeting are taken from Rainey, *1855-1856 Memphis Directory*, Tanner, *1859 Memphis Directory*, 1860 U.S. Census, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee; 1858 Rucker Map of Memphis, SCA.

jury found the duo “not guilty.”<sup>108</sup>

This episode distressed elite Memphians more so because it had occurred in their isolated suburban community, not in the streets of Memphis or the tenement slum of Pinch. The committee who promised “prompt and effective suppression” did not forget their duty. Their community had rapidly transformed into a sink of vice, race-mixing, and violence. The men of the community could no longer permit such nuisances to exist. Two weeks after the attempted murder, on September 17<sup>th</sup> at three o'clock in the morning, Madam Miller's brothel was set on fire. The alarm was raised and the terrified inhabitants clambered from the house, saving only their trunks. The *Appeal* reported that locals believed the fire “to be the work of an incendiary.” No one is reported to have died, although the house had been reduced to ash.<sup>109</sup>

A common feature of mid nineteenth century life, fire posed a constant threat to urban and country residents alike. Flammable materials made up the bulk of many structures, and roofs made from wood shingles received no treatment to prevent errant sparks from setting them ablaze. Brothels appear to have been susceptible to fire in Memphis, not only because of the manner of their construction but also because of the rowdy clientele and the actions of local vigilance committees. Although authorities had no suspects and the *Appeal* would not speculate, the Miller brothel fire had likely been set by vigilantes. The respectability of the suburbanites and the status of the victims as a civic nuisance made them immune to any prosecution.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> *Appeal*, July 2, November 8, December 1, 1857, September 15, 1858; The near-lynching of Able (or Abel) was a significant event; Able shot a man dead in front of the Gayoso Hotel, in full view of multiple witnesses, in an argument over debt. Thousands of Memphians gathered to wrest Able from prison and he was carried to the Navy Yard where a makeshift gallows was prepared. The event is yet another indication of the riotous mob atmosphere that existed in the Bluff City prior to the Civil War. Nathan Bedford Forrest is believed to have saved Able's life and insisted on the proper course of justice. Some historians, however, have cast doubt on this. See Jack Hurst, *Nathan Bedford Forrest: A Biography* (Random House, 1994), 49-50.

<sup>109</sup> *Appeal*, September 18, 1858.

<sup>110</sup> For a particularly costly brothel fire, see *Appeal*, October 16, 1867, in which Margaret Hayden lost \$7,000 in furniture. For fires and fire prevention in the nineteenth century, see Baker, *The Richmond Theater Fire*, 284 notes 14, 16.

Over the next few weeks Miller and her “gang” sought shelter all over town. Initially they established themselves in a house in Chelsea, a northern suburb of the city, but “indignant” neighbors drove them away. They then sought shelter in a house on Poplar Street, but “public sentiment would not allow them to stay there.” By September 24<sup>th</sup> the women had been received into the home of James A. Reynolds, who lived at the former Memphis Navy Yard, which since 1857 had been converted into a railroad depot. Locals discovered the presence of the women and brought it to the attention of the police. Hauled before the city recorder, Reynolds received a fine of twenty dollars and another fine of fifty dollars for each day he allowed Miller and her boarders to remain. The few allies the women had could not protect them. The options for Miller dwindled rather rapidly; the ire of Memphians over the intrusion of prostitutes into their midst meant they would likely have to leave the city if a living space could not be found. But Miller had either saved enough money from the profits of her suburban brothel or had perhaps sold her home in South Memphis, for by December she had bought the site of the old City Hotel, situated on the south side of Winchester Street between Center Alley and Main. The building had nearly forty rooms, half of which she sublet to a boarding house keeper. Suburban residents had succeeded in ousting an unwanted neighbor, but the suburb's gain proved the city's loss. Miller had simply relocated to a larger, more public locale in the city center.<sup>111</sup>

The stabbing of French Lou and the burning of Mary Miller's brothel prompted a public outcry against the sex trade in Memphis. The responses of citizens and city officials reveal divided opinions on the subject of prostitution and sexuality. Far from being a consensus regarding the proper use of sexuality or the regulation of prostitution, the controversy revealed a diversity of opinion. No “Victorian morality” determined how Memphians reacted to the public

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<sup>111</sup> *Appeal*, September 24, 1858.

discussion of prostitution. Although by no means the most salient feature of their criticisms, opponents of brothels tended to appeal to middle class, evangelical rhetoric. Most appealed to patriarchal duty in protecting families, but some stressed that legalization of prostitution felt foreign to Southern, protestant values.

Those who wished to ignore brothels or license them subscribed to a vernacular sexual framework or wrote and spoke as if influenced by strains of free thought. Nearly all voices in the debate wished to remove prostitutes from public space for the sake of the protection of families, but there could be no agreement on how to effect it. Faced with so many dissenting voices, politicians found it ultimately best to ignore the matter altogether, so long as brothels stayed out of the suburbs and did not disturb the peace. This not only protected the aldermen from political fallout associated with licensing vice, but it also protected the economic interests of suburban residents and landlords. Money and politics proved the most salient factors in the debates over how to address prostitution.<sup>112</sup>

Just days after Madam Miller's brothel burned to a smoking ruin, Alderman Thomas Finnie, described as “a great moral reforming alderman,” offered a report to the board suggesting the city regulate “lewd women” without licensing brothels. The board of aldermen reacted to Finnie's report with “titters and laughter.” The editor of the *Appeal* commented that their attitude “showed either how far the city's legislators were from appreciating the extent and profundity of the evil, or their indifference to it.” Far from a laughing matter, these brothels were “sapping the morals of society, robbing youth of innocence and virtue, bringing discord to the domestic hearth, crushing with anguish the hearts of loving wives, and stamping upon innocent babes the damning consequences of guilt too foul to be named.” The editor also lamented the cruel fate of

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<sup>112</sup> For more on the frameworks of sexuality used here, see Horowitz, *Rereading Sex*, 5-8.



the “outcasts,” asking, “who in our land eats with publicans and sinners that they may have opportunity to whisper in their ears, 'Go and sin no more?'"<sup>113</sup>

While not “indifferent” to the matter of prostitution, the aldermen stood ready to tolerate it so long as it did not threaten public order or make its way into the suburbs. They did not subscribe entirely to the bourgeois, evangelical language promoted by the *Appeal*. The “titters and laughter” which the editor of the *Appeal* found so appalling grew out of what Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz calls vernacular sexual culture. Vernacular sexuality often passed between men as part of their socialization as youngsters. It focused on male arousal and had an “earthy acceptance” of desire which many believed sprang from hot blood. Vernacular sexuality, which formed the basis of bawdy humor, also shaped how many men viewed sex workers. Men of the sporting world, a realm which many aldermen frequented, considered prostitutes humorous figures worthy of jest. In contrast, the middle class evangelical view of sexuality distrusted the flesh and viewed lust and sex outside of marriage as nothing other than sin. Free and easy sexuality not only constituted sin, it threatened the establishment of a moral civic order. The industrial values of decorum and self-control, which included sensual self-denial, also influenced the middle-class view of promiscuity. Middle-class evangelical reformers sought to remove overt sexuality from the public arena, not only in the form of prostitution, but in the form of publications that promoted other conceptions of human sexuality. The reaction of the aldermen to the topic of prostitution indicates a tolerant attitude toward institutions which many of them not only patronized, but also profited.<sup>114</sup>

That city aldermen would have a largely tolerant attitude toward prostitution is not surprising. One Memphis alderman was known to have profited from organized prostitution. G.P.

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<sup>113</sup> *Appeal*, July 22, September 24, 1858.

<sup>114</sup> Horowitz, *Rereading Sex*, 5-8.

Foute, who years before had been arrested and brought up on charges for either renting or permitting prostitutes to live on his property, served on the board in 1858. Other city officials also enriched themselves through participation in the sex trade, notably the sheriff, police, and justices of the peace. The importance of prostitution to these city officials, as well as to landlords and merchants would have been apparent to the aldermen. Much of the commerce of Front Row, the commercial heart of the city, depended upon saloons and the activities of the public women who attracted male customers. Aldermen also frequented brothels. Alderman P.J.C. Mahoney, an Irish immigrant, attracted public attention for frequenting Mary Miller's establishment. That Mahoney had been found in a brothel does not seem to have angered citizens so much as “hugging” a black prostitute *in flagrante dilecto*. An observer witnessed Mahoney engaging in sexual intercourse with a “Negro woman” in the kitchen of Madam Miller's brothel. Much of the anger directed at Mahoney came from the *Appeal*, rather than from his colleagues on the board. When it came time to hold a hearing on whether or not Mahoney should be expelled from the board, the city attorney found “the board could not, in its legislative capacity take cognizance of any such acts as was understood to have been charged against the alderman from the first ward.” The editor of the *Appeal* criticized the decision, quoting the ordinances of the city charter permitting expulsion of aldermen for “disorderly behavior.” Mahoney had been caught openly engaging in a common pastime of Memphis politicians and elites. To expel Mahoney might have exposed other aldermen to such disciplinary action.<sup>115</sup>

However, public opposition to the sex trade became too great to ignore entirely, particularly now that an outcry had arisen among suburban dwellers to ensure that prostitution

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<sup>115</sup> 1855-1856 Recorder Docket, May 16, 1856; *Appeal*, March 10, 17, 19, 1861; Recorder William L. Duff and Sheriff Patrick Winters both rented properties to madams; For an instance of police blackmail of sex workers, see *Appeal*, March 10, 1861, and Chapter Three below, where it is covered in greater depth.

remain within the city center. Taking inspiration from a law passed the year before in New Orleans known as the “Lorette Law,” which also had the goal of removing prostitution from more respectable urban areas, the board of aldermen drafted an ordinance that licensed prostitution and severely limited the movements of prostitutes. On October 19<sup>th</sup>, Alderman Charles Kortrecht presented a draft to the board which “proposed to *license and control*” houses of prostitution. The drafted ordinance required keepers of houses of prostitution to present a petition to the mayor and vigilance committee, “setting forth the house to be occupied, number, names and ages of the occupants, and other facts proper to be made a record of, and pay a monthly tax in advance on each occupant of the house -- the tax to make a special fund to aid those who may wish to change their mode of life, and those who are needy and destitute.”<sup>116</sup>

Although not specifically named as such, the ordinance called for the licensing of brothels. These licenses, the ordinance stipulated, could be revoked at any time by the board or the vigilance committee, particularly if any brothel became rowdy, prostitutes walked the streets at night, or they made themselves a nuisance to others. The ordinance “intended to exclude lewd women from the streets and public places, and shut out from the public gaze this vice,” as well as “to limit and prevent venereal disease.” Prostitution, the board believed, could be regulated and controlled, but not entirely eradicated. The board also intended to provide prostitutes “some means of shelter, and protect them by police regulations from the abuse and assaults of rowdys and mobs.” The aldermen hoped that by “throwing the protecting arm of the law around fallen women, who to say the least, as often frail from misfortune and betrayal, as from an innate tendency to vice,” that the city may “hold out inducements . . . to quit their mode of life, and give them some hope of success in such an effort.” The ordinance proposed a refuge or hospital for

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<sup>116</sup> Schafer, *Brothels*, 145; *Appeal*, October 20, 22, 1858.

women to be funded by taxes collected on licensed brothels. The board took care to stipulate that the city would not derive revenue from the taxation of prostitution, but that it would specifically go to the rescue of “fallen women.” The proposed ordinance passed upon its first reading. The *Appeal* gave its support to the bill, noting that it had “the merit of a large humanity.” Memphis had instituted a system of regulated, licensed prostitution. Memphis had taken a radical step in enacting this law, but it would not last for long. <sup>117</sup>

Respectable citizens reacted with horror at the passage of the ordinance. “I must say, it is monstrous,” the correspondent “M” wrote in a letter to the *Appeal*. “M” may have been Eugene Magevney, a wealthy former educator and first citizen of Memphis known for his strong Roman Catholic faith. Magevney's home stood one block away from a row of rowdy brothels and saloons on Washington Avenue. He asked the aldermen to consider their children, and appealed to fears of children being enticed into houses of prostitution:

What is a girl fourteen years old but a mere child, liable to be led astray at any time, by designing persons; and requiring, at that age, the most watchful care of her parents? I cannot believe it possible that there is a man in our city, or even in the South, who would so far degrade himself as to legalize the reception of a child into a house of prostitution, to be degraded and made an outcast from society forever. Can a father, brother, or even one who is in any way connected with a young girl vote for such an ordinance?

Eugene Magevney had two daughters in 1858, one aged fourteen and another fifteen.

Kidnapping and enticement into a life of prostitution presented a real threat to young women.

“M” warned the aldermen that their children would curse them if they carried out legalization.

“Let them reflect, that someday it may be said to them, even by their own children, 'You voted to license a house of ill fame on a big scale, thereby giving your aid and countenance to such

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

establishment, and if we are ruined by them, let the blame rest upon you and not upon us.” In addition, “M” played upon sectional feeling when he spoke of men “in the large cities of the North, who would even sop their bread in the slime of prostitution; but I cannot believe we have any such in our midst . . . you cannot find many of the old prostitutes, hardened in iniquity, who would vote for any such a law, even if it only recommended or legalized the reception of a negro child.” This comment regarding a “negro child” is yet another indication of the popular notion that black women inclined naturally to a life of promiscuity.<sup>118</sup>

Similarly, “A HEAD OF A FAMILY” pleaded with the aldermen “in the name of humanity, decency, and my family.” He remarked rather sardonically that the aldermen might as well license and regulate “theiving [sic] shops” and murder, as these worked as adjuncts of the “Bawdy house business.” It would be better, he remarked to “establish a pest-house on each square, and propagate the small-pox and seven year itch, than to promote the growth of the soul and body damning influences of Bawdy houses.” If bawdy houses had to exist at all, he continued, they should be “located far from the city as possible, that the youth of our city may not be ensnared through the night walking inmates of such houses, who can usher through a door into a street, and at once be in the midst of ladies, gentlemen and unsuspecting youths a moral pestilence.” The fear of prostitutes inhabiting the same space as respectable “ladies and gentlemen” arose out of the difficulty in telling prostitutes apart from respectable women.<sup>119</sup>

Fear of prostitutes infiltrating elite society prompted middle-class Memphians to adopt measures intended to screen women attending balls and dances. Fireman's balls in particular came under scrutiny, as men from elite fire companies mingled with men from lower class

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<sup>118</sup> *Appeal*, October 24, 1858; 1850 U.S. Census, Population Schedule, Third Ward, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee, 74.

<sup>119</sup> *Appeal*, October 22, 1858; The dress of prostitutes during this period differed little from the mode of respectable women. This is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two.

backgrounds at these functions. The shortage of available women often led to firemen bringing “women of bad repute” to dances. To prevent this, fire companies set up committees to screen ladies in advance of dances. All ladies who planned to attend had to ensure their respectability. This not only protected elite women from associations which might tarnish their good name, but upheld familial honor and maintained class boundaries.<sup>120</sup>

Memphis ministers struggled to impart the message that the crooked and broad path that wound its way through gambling halls, saloons and brothels led inevitably to not only perdition, but an early grave. Much of the opposition to licensing prostitution originated among middle class evangelicals who believed that compromise with sin gave it sanction. Memphis ministers had warned their congregations about the growth of vice in their midst, and particularly of the dangers it posed to young men. Alarmed by the rise of rowdy masculine entertainments that involved drinking, gambling and sex, Memphis ministers scrambled to inculcate young men with the moral teachings of the Gospel. Reverend T.J. Drane invited the public, “and particularly young men,” to hear a sermon entitled “Devices of Satan” at the First Baptist Church in September of 1858. Advertisements for the LaGrange Presbyterian College in the city papers reassured well-to-do parents the school's code of laws would “suppress all tendencies to vice or immorality” in the student body. The code of conduct forbade attending “balls or parties for promiscuous dancing,” drawing or exhibiting “indecent pictures” and mandated expulsion for “flagrant offences against morality.” Theaters came under public scrutiny as well. In a letter to the editor, “Pater Familias” warned of the moral dangers posed by theaters where young men drank, watched immoral plays such as *Camille*, and mingled with prostitutes: “How many young men -- bankers, clerks and others -- may attribute a life's disgrace to these places of public

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<sup>120</sup> Holzer, *Brawling*, 165.

resort,” the author wondered. The city papers also printed articles on the deeds of noted members of the sporting fraternity, articles which titillated as much as they offered a word of warning to young readers. An article in the *Appeal* on the downfall of two New York sporting men served as a “lay sermon’ on the dangers of fast living,” and warned young readers to avoid the “innumerable temptations which present themselves to the young and inexperienced” in large cities.<sup>121</sup>

Legalizing prostitution gave legal sanction to the temptations which thronged the Memphis streets. The correspondent “G” warned of passing laws contrary to scripture: “When, gentlemen, you pass an ordinance to license, you pass an ordinance declaring God’s law upon this subject a *nullity*, and I warn you of the consequences.” “G” criticized the board for their apparent cosmopolitanism and attempted to stir fears of foreign influence on American institutions: “For those who want no better morality than that of Paris, in France,” he remarked, “the licensing of such houses may do. But such institutions will not be tolerated as *legal* and *legally* respectable by this Bible and Protestant country, and by the sons of the *Pilgrims*, the *Hugenots*, and the Revolutionary sires.” A twinge of nativism colored the criticism of “G,” who associated the legalization of prostitution with Catholicism and foreigners. Prostitution would not be tolerated in an upright, Protestant nation founded upon self-control, industry, and the Bible. The only solution to removing prostitutes from city space involved establishing a “*House of Refuge and Correction* to which every female street vagabond may be taken and put to work and reformed, and my word for it, such stock will soon be scarce in our streets.” Such a plan, although bandied about in the press for more than a decade, would not be seriously undertaken

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<sup>121</sup> *Appeal*, October 3, 1857, September 18, 1858, November 20, 1859, November 19, 1869; Trustees of La Grange Synodical College, *Code of Laws For the Government of La Grange Synodical College* (La Grange, 1859), 12-13.

until the mid-1870s.<sup>122</sup>

If the letters expressing opposition are taken as an indicator of the larger community, then the ordinance proved quite unpopular. “M” related that “nineteen out of every twenty of our citizens are opposed to it.” Of the opinions of working class residents, there is little to go on; nor did the opinions of sex workers themselves figure into the debate. But the ordinance did not lack supporters. Another correspondent also going by the initial “M,” agitated in the *Appeal* for the passage of the ordinance. This second “M” based his support of the ordinance on liberal grounds, noting that it would violate the rights of women to force them into workhouses. Opponents of licensing, “M” wrote, “propose to *have them taken up and put in* what you call a House of Refuge, and *made to work*. This seems to me a most imbecile proposition, nor am I aware that it is practiced by any civilized and enlightened government.” “Do you not know,” he continued, “that they are human beings, belong to the human family, and have the same legal rights to walk upon the streets as you or anyone else? Would you prohibit them from going on the streets to attend market, or purchase other necessaries of life? Any city ordinance denying them this privilege would be void. Could you establish an inquisition to ascertain their business on the streets? Nonsense!” “M” characterized the position of opponents to licensing as one “contrary to human rights, to all civilized governments, to our republican form of government, and the Constitution of these United States.” “M” proposed to “offer inducements” for prostitutes to remain indoors, “or if you prefer it, permit them to live in houses – of two evils take the least – allow owners to rent them houses without being subject to a fine, and if they behave themselves and keep orderly, afford them that protection to which every orderly individual is entitled.” “M” had the same goal as many opponents of licensing: the desire to remove “lewd women” from

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<sup>122</sup> *Appeal*, October 22, 1858.



public space. If a program of licensing became law, “it might lessen their occupancy of the streets and public carriages or hacks,” and wives and daughters would not be “annoyed on the streets.”<sup>123</sup>

In response to the negative reaction to the proposed plan of licensing, Alderman Charles Kortrecht distanced himself from the ordinance in a letter to the city papers. “The idea of a license or permission for such houses did not originate with me,” he wrote, “though I confess that when suggested I did not anticipate all the objections since raised to it.” Kortrecht admitted to being somewhat naïve in his attitude toward prostitution, thinking “the present stringent rules – excluding them shelter or house-room -- should be somewhat relaxed.” He had not then, he continued, “the benefit of the thorough discussion of this matter of ordinarily private police regulation,” and came to the conclusion that “bad women should be -- not simply banished from the streets, but annihilated and obliterated.” Kortrecht had the reputation of a reformer on the board, but not that of a moral crusader. In 1858 he drafted an ordinance banning the sale of obscene materials, but then later helped pass an ordinance extending the closing hours of Memphis saloons from 9:00 PM to 11:00 PM. Most of Kortrecht's reforms sought to cut city expenditures and waste, not purify the “moral atmosphere” of the city. His abrupt shift to a hard line on prostitution, however, did not last long. Two weeks later Kortrecht told the board he “doubted the possibility of licensing these houses, even if public sentiment would admit of it,” and he proposed “to ignore the existence of these females, so long as they kept themselves from observation, and only to interfere with them when they break the law and shock public decency.”<sup>124</sup>

The other aldermen accepted this plan. Drafting an ordinance that embraced both the

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., October 24, November 9, 1858.

<sup>124</sup> *Appeal*, October 30, 31, November 5, 1858.

moral demands of evangelical reformers and suburban dwellers, as well as acknowledged how intertwined prostitution had become with the local economy proved impossible. On November 5<sup>th</sup> the board passed an ordinance repealing the controversial ordinance. For two weeks Memphis had legalized prostitution. Now the board distanced itself from any special legislation regulating the sex trade, but made it clear that any house of prostitution would be subject to police action if it became disorderly. What constituted disorderly or a nuisance had not been clearly defined. The board called for houses of prostitution to be left unmolested if they remained orderly, but left the matter up to the discretion of the police. Alderman Copeland contended that the subject of prostitution fell within the sphere of the mayor and the police, the “Council had nothing to do with it.” Brothels would remain at least nominally illegal, but they received the protection of wealthy landlords and the tacit support of city aldermen.<sup>125</sup>

The political fallout from legislating prostitution in a common sense manner proved too dangerous politically. Copeland believed the executive officers of the city should “come to an agreement for these parties to live in the thickest part of the city, appointing certain localities where they should be undisturbed, provided they did not misbehave themselves.” Copeland concluded by adding, “let them by all means be kept from living in the suburbs.” The only other amendment to the proposal came from Alderman Robinson, who moved that the board prohibit the “cohabitation of white and colored persons, or their living together in the same room, or the same building.” He considered the matter to be “worse than the usual prostitution itself.” This last amendment may have been suggested to mollify both sides, who while not agreeing on the proper course of action in regulating prostitution, could at least agree on the separation of the races in matters of sexual conduct.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., November 17, 1858.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

In lieu of a legal system of licensing, an unofficial system of licensing and toleration of prostitution developed among city authorities, so long as sex workers remained quiet and did not disturb the peace. City authorities extracted semi-regular payments from madams and prostitutes, amounting to a kind of informal taxation or licensing fee. Brothels that refused to pay the fee found themselves facing a “descent” of policemen on their lodgings in the middle of the night. The police marched women to the stationhouse in the middle of the night, an often humiliating spectacle for women in varying degrees of undress. Once assembled around the stationhouse heating stove, the officer on duty extracted “forfeits.” Madams that cooperated with this system could look to the police for protection, who at times provided bouncers for social functions given by elite members of the demimonde. This system flourished after the Civil War, but it had its beginnings in the debate over how prostitution should be regulated by the city in the late 1850s. Police corruption reigned in the enforcement of this unofficial system of revenue generation. The system not only filled the city's coffers, but lined the pockets of policemen and other city officials. Policemen also accepted bribes from women who needed to put up bond money. In one instance, officers Applebee and Hoble accepted five dollars each from prostitutes to obtain bail from their place of lodging. The officers claimed they had been off-duty at the time and escaped punishment.<sup>127</sup>

The depth of the close connections between the police, local politicians, and the sex trade is perhaps best illustrated by Recorder William L. Duff and Sheriff P.M. Winters. As city recorder, Duff acted as justice of the peace for Memphis, handling minor criminal offenses, including prostitution. Beginning in the 1870s, Duff rented his property at number 34 Gayoso to Annie Cook, perhaps the best-known madam in Memphis for \$125 a month. P.M. Winters, who

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid. March 13, 1861.

served as Sheriff of Shelby County, and later as a justice of the peace and an attorney, became a close confidante of madam Blanche Curry. After Curry's death, Winters continued renting her property to other madams as executor of her estate. Both of these men continued working closely with prostitutes after their appointments to public office expired. The blatant corruption in the system of enforcement of prostitution laws influenced reformers to charge police and local politicians with blackmailing prostitutes and giving “protection” to others. Campaigns against police corruption, often little more than political power struggles, accomplished nothing.<sup>128</sup>

The board of aldermen proclaimed that houses of prostitution would be tolerated so long as they remained orderly. To ensure lewd women remained orderly, the aldermen imposed limits on their movement. The board passed an ordinance regulating the movement of prostitutes, imposing a twenty-five dollar fine on “lewd women who may be found on the streets after nightfall.” Madam Jennie Taylor ignored the ordinance and continued to parade her boarders on the boulevard. For this offense, Taylor received a twenty-five dollar fine. Taylor secured the services of lawyers Putney & Vollentine to appeal the decision and challenge the ordinance. The law cut into her brothel's business, which depended upon strolling the streets after dark to attract customers. But only a day later Taylor withdrew her appeal and agreed to pay the fine; she may not have been prepared for a drawn-out legal battle with the city. City authorities made a further attempt to impose a fine of fifty dollars on hackmen who drove prostitutes through town, but the ordinance failed to pass on the grounds that if sex workers could not ride in carriages, “they would walk, which would tend to increase rather than diminish immorality.” In the future,

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<sup>128</sup> *Appeal*, April 9, 1867, July 16, 1868, March 5, 1874, March 13, 1870, *Public Ledger*, April 12, 1876, August 17, 1870, December 28, 1880, February 24, 1874, June 8, 1868, March 3, 1874, May 3, 1867, *Winchester Home Journal*, April 18, 1867; Annie Cook probate record, 1878-03231, SCA, Mattie Jackson (Blanche Curry) probate record, 1880-06262, SCA.

Memphis prostitutes adopted the carriage as their preferred mode of movement through town.<sup>129</sup>

Shortly after the repeal of the ordinance and the acquittal of Eliza Milliner and John Able, attacks on brothels began again. The failure of the city aldermen to adequately address the issue of prostitution, as well as of the police force to effectively regulate it, led citizens to continue their attempts to drive sex workers from the city. On November 9th a number of “rowdies” attacked the Hayden brothel in South Memphis, “throwing brick-bats and using vile language to some of the women.” Hayden's brothel developed a reputation as the worst such establishment in the city. Days later the former City Hotel, where Mary Miller had reestablished herself and her employees, caught fire, again through the agency of an arsonist. “The fire alarm was rung, and the engines were promptly on the spot,” the *Appeal* reported, “but were unable to subdue the flames, and hence the entire building was consumed. The bare walls only being left standing.” For the second time in four months, Miller's places of business burned to the ground. No one died in the blaze, and a “good deal of furniture was saved.” Anger over the acquittal of Milliner and Able likely drove vigilantes to torch the building which had become the focus of public outrage over the presence of not only prostitutes, but gamblers and murderers immune to the law.<sup>130</sup>

Violence continued to cause problems in areas where brothels stood, particularly on Calhoun Street, near the Mississippi and Tennessee rail depot. Just weeks after her bagnio had been assailed by “rowdies,” Margaret Hayden's establishment became the focus of the public debate over prostitution. Hayden's house attracted the lowest element in the city, and Hayden herself may have actively engaged in stealing from her customers. This may explain why her

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<sup>129</sup> *Appeal*, August 7, 8, 1860, August 9, 1861; Memphis Recorder Docket, August 7, 1860.

<sup>130</sup> *Appeal*, November 9, December 12, 1858.

establishment became the scene of a number of assaults and brawls.<sup>131</sup>

On a crisp, late November night, a desperate fight broke out between William Fink, a tinner who lived on Beale street, and the inmates of the house. Fink, who according to the *Appeal* had “hitherto borne the character of a sober and moral man,” visited Hayden's brothel on the night of November 30. The newspapers depicted Fink as a victim of the brothel menace; as an upright man who had been led astray from the path of sobriety. The police apparently knew Fink better than the newspapers, describing him in the police blotter as a “bad fellow.” During his drunken brothel spree, Fink became noisy and violent, owing, some suggested, to drugged liquor.<sup>132</sup>

The inmates either threw Fink out of the house or attempted to put him out, at which point Fink found a heavy board and commenced beating Margaret Hayden mercilessly, inflicting some “severe bruises.” Fink also stabbed Bridget Hayden, although only inflicting a flesh wound. The inmates of the house, alarmed at Fink's brutality and his apparent intent to kill them, attempted to flee. All except one, Josephine Parker, made their escape. Fink caught Parker and a struggle ensued. Parker, prepared for such an eventuality, produced a small dagger from her person and repeatedly stabbed Fink in the chest with such ferocity that the handle broke off and the weapon remained stuck in the wound. In a “paroxysm [sic] of pain and rage” Fink dislodged the knife and made a number of desperate stabs at the girl, “with what effect he could not tell,” while Parker, in fear of her life, vainly sought shelter under a nearby table. Parker had been stabbed in the back of the head and in the center of the back, severing her spinal cord. Fink retreated from the house, leaving a badly bruised Margaret Hayden, a bloodied Bridget Hayden, and a paralyzed and bleeding Josephine Parker. All of the victims survived the encounter, but in

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid, December 1, 1858.

<sup>132</sup> *Appeal*, December 1, 1858

all probability Parker remained paralyzed.<sup>133</sup>

In response to the affray the *Appeal* did not condemn the actions of Fink so much as the existence of brothels. “The house where this deed was done is still going on, unchecked by our police,” the editor remarked. “It is worth observing,” he continued, “that a sort of understanding has been expressed in the City Council that for the future houses of prostitution in this city shall be left unmolested of justice, *while they remain quiet*. We have here a specimen of the consequences of permitting these houses to remain in their quietude, and the consequences are blood, and wounds, and death – the quiet is that of hellish vice.” The failure of the aldermen to act decisively in regulating or suppressing brothels had created a situation in which their legal status remained uncertain.<sup>134</sup>

Days later, outrage over what happened to William Fink sparked another violent outburst at the Hayden house. On a cold night, three days after Christmas, a large mob of youths, laborers, skilled artisans and merchants gathered near the abandoned Morris Cemetery in South Memphis. The mob probably originated in a nearby saloon; a handful dotted Causey street to the east, where locals and members of the floating population mingled. The makeup of the mob suggests a group of men from disparate backgrounds with a common goal: to drive Margaret Hayden out of business. Filled with sufficient amounts of liquor, the mob descended first upon Margaret Hayden's brothel, smashing out windows, forcing their way inside, and destroying virtually everything they could lay hands on: “the furniture, crockery, and other movables in the house were smashed, and as much mischief as possible done generally,” *The Appeal* reported. The mob then turned their attention to the other “lewd female,” Bridget Hayden, whose brothel stood nearby, and where “some mischief was done, and the woman herself assaulted.” The police

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

rushed to the scene of the riot and apprehended seventeen of the rioters before the mob hastily dispersed into the side streets and alleyways of the city.<sup>135</sup>

Motivated by both mercenary considerations and public objection to the presence of brothels, mob assaults on houses of prostitution stretched back to colonial Philadelphia and New York. In the colonial and early national period, brothel riots generally aimed at putting brothels out of business by attacking the tools of the prostitute's trade: furniture, beds, or any moveable property in the house which might be used for the purposes of "hospitality." Historian Timothy Gilfoyle argued that such assaults evolved as the product of both premeditated vigilante action and spontaneous outbursts resulting from a culture of male binge drinking. With the development of new notions of female domesticity, brothel rioters came not only to resent the presence of noisy prostitutes, but also independent, self-supporting women. Gilfoyle refers to men who attacked brothels for this reason as "brothel bullies;" their mode of conduct differed from previous modes of public mob violence in that they shifted away from solely attacking the tools of the prostitute's trade to also attacking the prostitutes themselves.<sup>136</sup>

Brothel riots also emerged out of a desire to preserve racial order. During the New York City draft riots of 1863, rioters attacked the brothels of white women who catered to free black men. While there is no direct evidence, there may have been a racial element to the Hayden riot. Lower class brothels such as Hayden's catered to free black men and white workingmen alike and this may have angered some local residents. Large quantities of liquor doubtless played a role in the assault on the Hayden brothels, but it is likely that rather than being a gang of roughs on a "spree," the riot had been planned by angry men gathered in nearby saloons.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> *Appeal*, December 28, 1858.

<sup>136</sup> Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 76-91.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-42; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Mind That Burns in Each Body': Women, Rape and Racial Violence," in Ann Snitnow, ed., *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York: 1983), 328-349; Leslie M. Harris,



Of the seventeen apprehended, most were Irish immigrants under the age of thirty. Most worked as laborers or skilled artisans, such as Mike Roach, a twenty-one year old bricklayer, or Thomas Murray a twenty-four year old shoemaker. Some older, more established figures, like James Howard, a forty-three year old merchant, joined the attack. These men may have been outraged by the treatment of William Fink at the hands of the Hayden brothel inmates, or the continued existence of a bagnio which violated all standards of decency. These working men resented the presence of independent women who made as much, if not more money, on a daily basis than they. Others such as John Magevney, the nephew of Eugene Magevney, sought to remove sex workers from their neighborhoods for moral reasons. Of the seven individuals identified from the group, two lived nearby and another a few blocks away in the fifth ward. Others undoubtedly joined the mob for mercenary reasons. John Castillo, a drayman and thief, who the police arrested just three days previous for “robbing a whorehouse,” also took part in the riot. A survey of the Memphis police blotter suggests a number of the crowd followed the river as vagrants who made their living through theft or graft. Many of the locals also had arrest records for crimes ranging from drunkenness to disturbing the peace. One member of the mob, Adam Williams, later came before the recorder on a separate charge for rioting.<sup>138</sup>

Rather than censure the actions of the attackers, the *Appeal* defended the deeds of the Hayden mob as performing a service for the city. The *Appeal* depicted the mob as seeking to restore order, morality and civic virtue. On the other hand, the editor castigated the “law-neglecting” police and complained, “the police will not report [brothels] for the action of the law;

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"From Abolitionist Amalgamators to 'Rulers of Five Points'": The Discourse of Interracial Sex and Reform in Antebellum New York City," in Martha Hodes, ed., *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History* (New York University Press, 1999), 191-212.

<sup>138</sup> The names of the rioters are taken from *Appeal*, December 28, 1858, Memphis Recorder Docket, SCA, Memphis Police Blotter, 1858-1860, SCA; Professions and ages are taken from 1860 U.S. Federal Census, Memphis, Shelby County Tennessee, and Rainey, *1855-1856 Memphis Directory*, Tanner, *1859 Memphis Directory*.

the citizens will not endure the presence of such infamous dens, and when they do by violence what the police ought to do lawfully, they are thrown into prison. Whatever this may be called, the fact is, the police are then made the protectors of a nuisance the law makes it their duty to abate.” The proliferation of brothels posed a threat to the moral fiber of the city, particularly to that of young men. Vigilantism became necessary to protect “husbands, sons, and brothers that [Memphians] do not want to see ruined by the connivance of the guardians of the law.”<sup>139</sup>

Brothel riots and attacks on houses of prostitution became a common occurrence in Memphis, a practice which the papers referred to as “cutting up.” In some instances, attackers simply vented their rage against sex workers. A.B. Williams, “a boy from Augusta, Georgia,” fired his pistol at the brothel of Madam White near the corner of Front and Union; there were no injuries and Williams received a small fine. Daniel Casey threw a rock through the window of Mary Miller's house, hitting her on the head and inflicting a serious wound. The police arrested F.J. Candlang for being drunk and “cutting up” in a house of ill-fame. In most attacks on brothels, however, men attempted to destroy furniture, which suggests a desire to drive madams out of business. Seven men attacked the house of “Big Mary” on Gayoso street, an establishment that functioned as a doggery, boarding house, and house of assignation. The men destroyed furniture and “committed other outrages unfit for detail,” which may indicate the rioters sexually assaulted one or more inmates. The police apprehended William Hughes and James Sullivan for “cutting up” and “committing outrages” in the house of Emma Piquet, as well as destroying furniture, ripping up a sofa, and threatening to shoot the inmates. In a particularly dramatic attack on a brothel, four steamboat men broke into the bagnio of French Lou and destroyed her furniture; they then hailed a public hack and ordered the driver to take them to a brothel on South

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<sup>139</sup> *Appeal*, December 28, 1858.

street for the same purpose. When they reached the place, the four men began to beat the driver, causing the horses to take fright and the carriage to overturn. The police apprehended them before they could continue and received fines of fifty dollars each.<sup>140</sup>

Others attempted to use the threat of mob violence as a way of squeezing money out of sex workers. In September 1861, Pat Sullivan led a “disorderly crowd” to Mary Miller's house on Winchester street, where he attempted to extort five dollars for himself and his partners in exchange for “protection.” When Miller replied “the police would protect her,” the crowd entered and “behaved in a disorderly manner.” The recorder fined Sullivan sixty dollars. This incident indicates that some Memphis brothels received protection from local gangs. Instances of former sheriffs and sheriff's deputies protecting some brothels and ripping up furniture in others hints at the use of violence by city officers to punish madams who did not toe the line. “It is news to many,” the editor of the *Appeal* commented, “that the demimonde figures in politics.” Yet it did. The rash of brothel riots and burnings of the late 1850s gave way to a more orderly system of police and official collusion with houses of prostitution by the early 1860s. Mary Miller's reply that “the police would protect her,” takes on a new meaning. By 1861, Memphis prostitutes counted on the “protection” of the police, who along with political and mercantile allies, ensured that brothels remained open and protected from disturbances.<sup>141</sup>

A glimpse of this can be seen in the activities of Sheriff and later Justice of the Peace P.M. Winters, who sold his services to a brothel kept by Blanche Curry. An invoice written by

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<sup>140</sup> Memphis Police Blotter, March 15, July 13, 1859, SCA; *Daily Avalanche*, March 15, 1861; *Appeal*, December 15, 27 1861, January 23, 1862. Many, although not all, of these riots corresponded to periods when laborers would have been out of work, particularly December and January.

<sup>141</sup> Brock, “Memphis's Nymphs Du Pave,” 61-62; Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 87, 91; *Public Ledger*, December 23, 1875. Timothy Gilfoyle argues that ward politicians in New York employed gangs of toughs to extort money from prostitutes, a practice which formed the financial foundation for the Tammany political machine. No clear evidence exists for Memphis aldermen directing gangs to attack or extort money from brothels, but it is certainly not beyond the realm of possibility.

Winters lists a fee of fifty dollars charged to Curry for “attention in regard to the abatement of nuisances in market square,” where Curry's brothel stood. Brothels that failed to cooperate with the police or the sheriff faced attacks from hired ruffians. A group of toughs destroyed furniture and ripped up wallpaper with their pocketknives in Bidley O'Brien's market square bagnio in 1882. After the police apprehended the hoodlums in another nearby house of assignation, a Sheriff's deputy accosted them and “demanded that the prisoners should not be taken to the station.” A struggle ensued and the police arrested the Sheriff's deputy, hauling him before the recorder on a charge of interfering with police business. The evidence suggests the conflicting interests of Memphis law enforcement agencies and active collusion with madams.<sup>142</sup>

Despite the arson and riots, the number of sex workers in Memphis increased between 1858 and 1861. Rather than flee Memphis, sex workers dug in their heels and doggedly held onto their places in the growing city. After hiring a contractor to survey the damage done to her ruined hotel, Mary Miller learned repairs would cost \$5,636.00. Miller turned to V.B. Waddell, a lawyer and proprietor of a collection agency as her security, and borrowed against her real estate holdings to effect the repairs on credit. By 1861 the hotel had been completely rebuilt and Miller began renting it to another madam for an exorbitant sum. Miller succeeded despite strong opposition to her presence in the city. An act of arson had only transformed the hotel into a lavish palace of prostitution that would operate for more than fifty years. The determination of Mary Miller, who rebuilt her brothel after having suffered through two arson attacks testifies to the toughness and business acumen of Memphis prostitutes. Margaret Hayden, who endured repeated assaults on her person and house of prostitution, remained in business as well, moving from the rough neighborhood of Morris Cemetery in South Memphis to a building only feet from

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<sup>142</sup> *Appeal*, September 30, 1887; Mattie Jackson (Blanche Curry) probate record, 1880-06262, SCA.

the river landing in the business district. The days when sex workers faced exile from town at the hands of angry residents had, for the time, become only a memory. By the beginning of the Civil War, prostitutes no longer operated on the margins of Memphis, but flaunted their trade in all of its glory on the main thoroughfares.<sup>143</sup>

The stage had been set for a struggle between prostitution cliques and forces seeking to remove them from public space. Surprisingly, the opponents of sex workers found themselves at a disadvantage in this struggle. Prostitution indeed had powerful foes in the form of evangelical elites and a rising middle-class who sought to purify the city of its immorality. Upwardly mobile members of the working class who had accepted at least some of the ideology of self-control promoted by middle-class reformers allied with reformers. Many working class men also viewed economically and sexually independent women with resentment, a mentality which influenced them to launch attacks on places of prostitution. But prostitutes had silent and powerful allies in landlords, merchants and politicians, as well as among the police. The profitability of prostitution, as well as the persistence of a conception of vernacular sexuality, which looked with greater tolerance on the existence of bawdy houses, enabled sex workers to continue plying their trade. These “allies,” however, exploited prostitutes for their own gain and pleasure. Among all of these groups, whether enemies or allies, existed more than a few customers. A man might say one thing publicly about prostitution to his family, friends, colleagues or fellow parishioners; but he would behave quite differently when ensconced within the walls of a bagnio, saloon, or gambling hall.

The men who patronized and protected Memphis brothels would soon vote to leave the Union. War loomed on the horizon, a war that would decisively transform the political, social,

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<sup>143</sup> Mary Miller to W.B. Waddell, 1861, deed of trust, book 49 pg. 153, SCA; Memphis 1865 Census, 152, SCA.

and sexual landscape of the city. Neither reformers nor supporters of prostitution could know the radical transformations that would be wrought by war mobilization and military occupation. Prostitutes thronged the city in the coming years, prompting one observer to pronounce Memphis “courtesan cursed.” The brothel bullies did not disappear, either. Only now they possessed the official sanction of a military uniform and martial law.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> *Appeal*, February 28, 1863.

## CHAPTER TWO: "SANITARY WOMEN:" THE REGULATION OF PROSTITUTION IN CIVIL WAR MEMPHIS

"Military government, so necessary, so effective under one state of things, is a terrible cancer in the community where peace resides." -- St. Louis *Republican*, September 15, 1863

"It is alleged that the officer thus disgraced introduced a woman of ill-fame at the Gayoso House, passed her off as his wife, and that such the ladies of officers called upon her. The denouement was soon reached, and the explosion follows." -- St. Louis *Republican*, September 15, 1863

In Early October of 1864, hackloads of fashionably-dressed prostitutes regularly disembarked, between 2:00 and 5:00 PM, at the southwest corner of Union and Main streets. Others, less fashionably dressed, came from their peripatetic wanderings about the city's saloons or from the camps of displaced persons, carrying bundles of their possessions. Hack drivers waited and gabbed with one another on the curb while the women entered through a confectionary store or ascended a side stairwell to 21 Union Street, a second-story office. Formerly a warehouse space employed by a wholesale grocery, city officials working in conjunction with the army hastily converted it into an office. A sign on the door greeted the women: "City Medical Inspection Department."<sup>1</sup>

Military officials required white sex workers to visit this office. On September 30<sup>th</sup>, T.H. Harris, the military-appointed mayor of Memphis, handed down a directive that all "women of

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Smart, *The Medical and Surgical History*, 895; See the ad for B. Dumaine & Co., *Appeal*, April 19, 1861;

the town” and “kept mistresses” be registered with the city or “inevitably incur punishment.” Under the terms of the directive, women were required to pay a one-time fee of ten dollars to be registered with the city, plus a weekly medical exam fee of two dollars and fifty cents. Each week, sex workers visited this office on the corner of Union and Main to ensure they were free venereal disease. City official allocated the fees from these visits for the operation of female wards at the city hospital that catered specifically to sex workers. Through this measure, military officials intended to arrest the spread of venereal disease among federal troops who flocked daily to the dozens of whorehouses that dotted the city.<sup>2</sup>

The men appointed to carry out this job did not hail from Memphis. Behind a desk in the office sat J.C. Heazlett, a former captain of the 147<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania Volunteers. Heazlett resigned his post in the military in 1863 and now worked as part of the bureaucracy of Union occupied Memphis; his job for the Medical Inspection Department involved registering prostitutes. Once registered, Heazlett ushered the women into another room where they received a medical inspection by the city physician, Dr. A. Gregg, a Unionist from Kentucky. Gregg probably did not relish this disagreeable job. J.B. Bingham, another pro-Union bureaucrat, described Gregg as “an utterly bankrupt and unscrupulous creature.” Gregg's appointment to this post may have been a sign that he had fallen out of favor among those in positions of political power in Memphis.<sup>3</sup>

The exams performed in this office required invasive and uncomfortable procedures. Inspecting for venereal disease in the middle of the 1860s required a physical examination of the genitals, a process that frequently involved the use of a speculum. Opponents of the Contagious

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<sup>2</sup> Smart, *Medical and Surgical History*, 895.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*; LeRoy P. Graf, ed., *The papers of Andrew Johnson: 1864-1865*, Vol. 7, 273-274, Eleventh Census of the United States, Special Schedule, Surviving Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines, and Widows, Etc., German Hospital, Philadelphia, 1.



Diseases Act, a similar law enacted in the British Empire at the same time as the regulations in Memphis, attacked medical inspections that employed specula as “the rape of the speculum.” Neither sex workers nor city officials enjoyed these examinations. The provisional mayor of Memphis described the operation of the Medical Inspection Department as “extremely unpleasant.” The department conducted weekly inspections of at least 134 prostitutes.<sup>4</sup>

When Dr. Gregg found women to be infected he forcibly admitted them to the City Hospital. Even though these wards allegedly featured “all the privacy and comfort of a home,” the city had not made them resorts of pleasure. The city confined women in these “lock wards” until they had been declared disease-free. When found to be free of contagion, Dr. Gregg presented prostitutes with a certificate and declared them “sanitary.” On the streets and in the parlors of the city, everyday Memphians no longer referred to these women as “cyprians” or “harlots,” but as “sanitary women.”<sup>5</sup>

The Memphis regulations expanded on a law that had been in use for more than a year in nearby Nashville. This law called for mandatory medical inspections and the creation of special female hospital wards to stop the spread of venereal diseases. The Nashville program had seen some success in arresting the spread of venereal disease, and Memphis leaders wished to inaugurate a similar program in their city, albeit one which placed restrictions on the public activities of women.<sup>6</sup>

When not being locked away in the “private” wards of the City Hospital, the new law also required “sanitary women” to be locked away behind closed doors. The new Memphis

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<sup>4</sup> Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz, ed., *Women's Identities and Bodies in Colonial and Postcolonial History and Literature* (Cambridge, 2012), 131 n. 25.

<sup>5</sup> Smart, *Medical and Surgical History*, 895; *Daily Missouri Republican* (St. Louis) August 18, 1863.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the Nashville Program, see Jeanine Cole, “Upon the Stage of Disorder,” 40-65.

regulations, “of a more elaborate and detailed character than those on which the Nashville system was based,” severely curtailed the activities of prostitutes, something the Nashville authorities had not done. The law forbade prostitutes from streetwalking, riding in carriages or buggies, riding for pleasure on horseback, “wearing showy, flash or immodest dress” in public, visiting the city squares, theaters, or any resorts of “ladies.” In addition, the plan put forward by Memphis authorities did not provide for the registration of African American prostitutes, another point on which the two plans differed. What had motivated Memphis authorities to put forth such a restrictive and racially-exclusionary plan for the regulation of prostitution in Memphis? And why did federal and city authorities adopt it? If the Nashville plan had been so successful, why amend it for adoption in Memphis?<sup>7</sup>

Between 1861 and 1865, Memphis became a massive military camp. Armies tramped through the streets of Memphis and bivouacked nearby, temporarily swelling the population. Perhaps no other place on the Mississippi came to be as nearly devoid of the finer points of civilization than Memphis during this period. A northern journalist described occupied Memphis briefly as muddy, desolate, and “courtesan cursed.” It became, in effect, a large brothel. Drawn by the prospect of profiting from the hordes of soldiers who thronged the city, professional prostitutes, together with refugee women from the South, filled the city. This added to a process which had been going on in Memphis prior to the beginning of the war: the growth of a highly visible, geographically widespread, sex trade. The growing sexual disorder of the city in the late antebellum period became more visible in Confederate Memphis, as prostitutes claimed public space and adopted modes of behavior which challenged middle-class notions of respectability.

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<sup>7</sup> Smart, *Medical and Surgical History*, 895.

The beginning of Union occupation in the summer of 1862 led to an even greater sexual upheaval, as scores of women defied civil and military law to survive through selling their bodies. Prostitutes' intrusion into the public sphere, which had begun prior to the war, only accelerated under occupation. Prostitutes and soldiers inverted the gender and racial order of the city as the streets became the daily scene of undisguised prostitution. Black and white courtesans consorted openly with civil and military officials and the placards of bawdy houses dangled defiantly above the sidewalks. As soldier's companions and the subject of military discipline, prostitutes stood at the center of public life during the war, a space they would continue to occupy following the war's end.<sup>8</sup>

Local residents looked with horror at the “infamous indecencies” of open prostitution and race-mixing occurring in the city. Hoping to put a stop to this, authorities began regulating prostitution in the fall of 1864. This policy, which authorities ostensibly adopted to control the spread of venereal disease, also sought to drive prostitutes from the public sphere and protect middle-class and elite women from insult. In this respect it went further than the Nashville law. Protecting white women from exposure to “public women” also protected the interests of Memphis merchants. Beginning prior to the war, a small but influential group of merchants and city leaders began working to reorganize public space around middle-class and elite women, particularly shoppers. Business owners sought to draw middle-class women into their establishments by redefining them as respectable places. Sex workers threatened this effort by appropriating spaces in the heart of the city. Attempts at limiting the movement of prostitutes through the city failed, however. By the war's end, prostitutes rose to a place of prominence in

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<sup>8</sup> *Appeal*, February 28, 1863.

the city's new social order.<sup>9</sup>

Past scholarship has examined prostitution in Civil War-era Memphis in a vacuum. Scholarly works on prostitution in Memphis deal largely with the period from 1861 to 1865. As a result, the experiences of Memphis sex workers and citizenry are presented largely out of context. The Civil War emerges as an anomalous period in the city's history, one in which all checks on open displays of sexuality broke down. Without placing the war-time experiences of Memphis in the context of the outbreaks of savage violence directed against prostitutes which had preceded it, or the entrenchment and public expansion of the city's sex trade following the war, scholars cannot place the events of the war years in their proper context.

Works by James Jones and Thomas Lowry approach prostitution from a medical and military perspective. Lowry, himself a physician, asserts the legalization of prostitution in Memphis succeeded. He finds the program made money and treated at least thirty-four prostitutes for disease. Jones, however, argues the Nashville and Memphis programs only managed prostitution; they did not control it or successfully limit the spread of venereal disease.<sup>10</sup>

Two signal works from the past twenty years attempt a more in-depth analysis of the experiences of prostitutes themselves. Historians Darla Brock and Jeannine Cole focus on the lives of prostitutes and the ways in which Memphians viewed them. Brock's work addresses the

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<sup>9</sup> For more on the gendering and re-gendering of public space during this period, see Richard Butsch, "Bowery B'hoys and Matinee Ladies: Re-Gendering of Nineteenth Century American Theater Audiences," *American Quarterly* 46.3 (September 1994), 374-405 and Mary Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

<sup>10</sup> James B. Jones, "A Tale of Two Cities: The Hidden Battle Against Venereal Disease in Civil War Nashville and Memphis," *Civil War History* 31 (1985); James B. Jones, "Municipal Vice: The Management of Prostitution in Tennessee's Urban Experience. Part I, the Experience of Nashville and Memphis, 1854-1917," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 50 (1991); Thomas P. Lowry, *The Story the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell: Sex in the Civil War* (Stackpole Books, 2012).

vicissitudes of life as a prostitute: violence, drug abuse, run-ins with the law, and abortion. She convincingly argues the war increased economic opportunity for prostitutes and altered the make-up of the city's sex worker population. By emphasizing the “sheer and utter misery” of the sex trade, however, Brock characterizes prostitutes largely as victims. Drawing on the work of Jurgen Habermas, Jeannine Cole describes the rapid deregulation of prostitution in Memphis following the war as a reaction to prostitutes' incursion into the public sphere. Cole rightly places concerns over prostitutes' entry into the public sphere at the center of debate over the regulation of prostitution in Memphis. She incorrectly asserts, however, that regulation itself led to the increased public presence of prostitutes within the city. She argues that prostitutes' use of the legal system, the adoption of a “middle class veneer,” and the appropriation of public space after legalization “launched the issue of prostitution into the public sphere of newspapers and political discourse in Memphis and Nashville.” But as has been demonstrated, the late 1850s witnessed a dramatic increase in “public women” in the Bluff City. In 1858 the city very publicly debated how to best regulate them, briefly creating a system of legalized prostitution. The Civil War did not launch prostitutes into the public and political life of the city but rather it accelerated a process that had been going on since 1857.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, the factor of race has not been addressed adequately by these scholars. The Civil War radically changed the racial makeup of the city, which also increased the number of black sex workers. Lowry merely points to the existence of interracial sexual liaisons and Brock ignores them all together. Cole does recognize that Memphis authorities only registered “white

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<sup>11</sup> Darla Brock, “Memphis’s Nymphs du Pave: 'The Most Abandoned Women in the World,’” *The West Tennessee Historical Society Papers*, 50 (1996), 58-69; Jeannine Cole, “Upon the Stage of Disorder: Legalized Prostitution in Memphis and Nashville, 1863-1865,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 68 (2009), 40-65.

cyprians,” but she argues this resulted from fears of racial strife in a city that resented black authority. This fails to convince given that large numbers of black troops with police powers occupied and maintained order in the city. If military authorities worried about stoking racial tensions, then why would they empower black troops to act in this role? Would the regulation of black prostitution have outraged Memphians any more than armed former slaves?<sup>12</sup>

Race is central to understanding why authorities in Memphis adopted the policies they ultimately did. The exclusion of black women emerged in part out of a pre-war mentality which held that black women possessed a licentious nature. Civil and military authorities enacted prostitution laws to guard the respectability of white women, something black women could not possess by virtue of their race. In addition, Memphis authorities concerned themselves more with preventing race-mixing than attempting to control intraracial black prostitution. Regulating black prostitution would mean sanctioning not only miscegenation, but also black women's financial independence. Furthermore, the exclusion of black women from this program cannot be properly understood without an examination of the men who created it, specifically Dr. Lorenzo Coxe and General Cadwallader C. Washburn. The role of Thomas H. Harris, Adjutant General and temporary mayor of Memphis, has been overstated by scholars. Harris merely carried out the proposal submitted by Coxe to Washburn in August of 1864. A look at the backgrounds of Coxe and Washburn reveals preexisting racial attitudes that may have influenced them to exclude black women from licensing and regulation.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Lowry, *Story*, 84; Cole, “Stage of Disorder,” 57-58.

<sup>13</sup> *Deborah Gray White, Ar'n't I A Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (W.W. Norton, 1985), 28-31; Cole implies Harris “refused to sanction” black prostitution, implying he created the regulations. Smart's *Medical History* is clear that Harris's role in creating the Memphis regulations was merely that of a functionary. The provisional council of Memphis granted the mayor powers to regulate prostitution in early August. When Coxe returned from Nashville in late August he submitted his findings to General Washburne, who then approved them for use, directing Harris to implement them. It is clear from this that Coxe and Washburne were

By the late 1850s, Main Street had developed into a center of daily life for middle-class and elite women in Memphis. A visitor noted in 1857 that “Main street is the fashionable one in the city, and is a well improved 'mart where merchants most do congregate,' and where ladies love to promenade while in the delightful pastime (to them) of shopping!” The mercantile establishments of the city, described as “large, fine and handsome buildings, with all the modern improvements and conveniences,” relied on the business of middle-class and elite women. While these comments, as a form of civic boosterism, exaggerate the polish of Main street, they demonstrate a transformation going on in the city's landscape and culture. Shopping developed into a respectable pastime for women, one which they could pursue, often unescorted. Shopping served the dual function of participating in the emerging consumer culture and also displaying oneself, either by broadcasting one's status to others or to attract the attention of men. In 1862 a correspondent for the *Appeal* described the scene on Dauphin Street in Mobile, Alabama, from which he wrote, and compared it to a scene then common on Main Street in Memphis:

Dauphin street is thronged every morning, between eight o'clock and noon, with ladies on “shopping” expeditions. True, many of them do not make any purchases; but, then, you know, they want “to see and be seen.” As was the custom on Main street, in Memphis, it is here; the men gather on the corners and ogle the belles as they lightly trip along the flags, and on the crossings gracefully lift the dress just high enough to show a pretty foot with delicately turned ankle. The scene is a very attractive one, and appears to be enjoyed by both parties.<sup>14</sup>

The common practice of promenading the fashionable thoroughfares of the city, particularly the places where a woman might be noticed by those of the opposite sex, already carried a tinge of

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the two central figures in creating the regulations. See Smart, *Medical and Surgical History*, 894-895 and Cole, 57.

<sup>14</sup> *Appeal*, April 14, 1857, July 15, 1862.

sexuality.

Respectable women, however, had not always promenaded in the business districts of Memphis. Merchants began to draw women into their establishments by domesticating them in the 1850s and 60s. Drawing women into public spaces opened new markets for merchants, it also broke down barriers that barred women from participating in the civic life of the city. This transformation unfolded as part of a larger national trend of reorganizing public space around the female shopper. The public sphere, defined as “dangerous” for women, remained a largely male realm. Promoters of the notion of separate spheres defined certain spaces within the urban landscape as threatening to white women's respectability. This maintained patriarchal control and also excluded women from political power. In seeking new female markets, merchants began to chip away at women's exclusion from the public sphere. Capitalists sought to redefine public space, particularly shopping districts, as “safe” for women, while promoting the notion that shopping constituted a feminine, domestic pursuit. This led to the emergence of such retail districts as “Ladies Mile” along New York's Broadway. At the same time, domesticating retail districts had the effect of exposing respectable women to the insults and threats posed by sex workers and other disreputable individuals and places. During the Civil War, Confederate authorities failed in their attempts to regulate the movement of prostitutes into public spaces frequented by women. After 1862, Union authorities, by failing to limit and sometimes actively increasing the numbers of sex workers in the city, further undermined the process of transforming the urban terrain of Memphis into a realm “safe” for respectable women.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Butsch, “Bowery B'hoys and Matinee Ladies,” 375-376; John Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth Century Urban America* (New York, 1990); Mary Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore, 1990), 68-69.



Still a largely masculine working-class city by 1860, Memphis had only tentatively begun transforming public spaces into areas suitable for unescorted middle-class and elite women. This process occurred slowly and unevenly in Memphis throughout the 1850s and still continued to unfold after the Civil War. The Bluff City retained much of its frontier character at the beginning of the Civil War, a character which persisted for many years. Dusty streets in summer became quagmires after downpours; pigs and dogs roamed freely, so much so that children carried weapons to defend themselves against strays; mercantile establishments stood next to noisy saloons that echoed with the sounds of variety shows and the imprecations of drunken men.<sup>16</sup>

This posed a problem for merchants, who sought to attract women to their establishments, particularly on Main Street. Department store owners, theater managers, and restaurateurs sought to imbue public spaces with respectability by domesticating them and making them more amenable to women. Auction houses such as the one kept by Robert Cayce appealed directly to women, as did department stores such as Strauss & Lehmann. The latter establishment promised women “polite and gentlemanly clerks who feel a pleasure in showing their goods.” The streets of the city's shopping districts, particularly Main and Second Streets, increasingly came to be increasingly haunted by respectable women in the late antebellum period. The importance of these new shoppers to merchants is particularly evident in the concern evinced by city aldermen over the muddy and dusty condition of the streets and sidewalks. In 1860, an article in the *Appeal* calling for the establishment of a horse-drawn street railroad complained that ladies had to “go shopping through the mud in winter and dust in summer.” The main thoroughfares of Memphis would not begin to be paved for another decade, and then in a haphazard, inefficient

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<sup>16</sup> For more on the rough, frontier character of Memphis in the late antebellum period, see Holzer, *Brawling on the Bluff*, 171, 189.

way.<sup>17</sup>

Women who conducted shopping unescorted also needed eateries that would admit them. France Trollope, in her sojourn through the United States in the 1830s, noted the restaurants of Memphis existed as a purely a male preserve. Matters had not changed a great deal by the eve of the Civil War. Memphis suffered from a dearth of respectable eateries; most specialized in oysters and doubled as groggeries, hardly places for virtuous women. In addition, aristocratic eating establishments would not admit unescorted women out on the town, attending to shopping, or visiting the theater. But by the late 1850s, Memphis women could visit such establishments as the “Ladies' and Gentlemens' Oyster Saloon” kept by P.H. Heinrich and a “Ladies Restaurant” that doubled as an ice cream saloon kept by Joseph Specht, which also furnished “extra dishes for families to order.” In a city with over 80 saloons and countless low groggeries and coffee houses, eating establishments which catered specifically to women and families seemed few and far between. Joseph Specht offered a space for women conducting their shopping to stop and have tea or a small meal. Establishments such as these continued to proliferate in the early years of the Civil War, indicating an increase in women conducting their affairs in the city's retail districts.<sup>18</sup>

A similar change also began to develop in the city's theaters prior to the beginning of the war. Traditionally, early American theater had been a male social club. Men attended theater not

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<sup>17</sup> *Appeal*, October 11, 1860, November 29, 1861. The *Public Ledger* complained that ever since the city paved Washington street, prostitution became much worse there, May 19, 1876. J.M. Keating believed the failure of the city to pave its streets, which he deemed “uneven and of every possible material that individual caprice could suggest,” emerged out of a corrupt system of ward politics. See Keating, *History of the City of Memphis*, 691-692.

<sup>18</sup> Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, 34-35; Andrew P. Haley, *Turning the Tables: Restaurants and the Rise of the American Middle Class, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 149; *Appeal*, February 8, June 16, 1857.

so much for the performances, but to socialize. By mid-century, progressive proprietors began domesticating theaters to appeal to middle-class and feminine audiences. They accomplished this by establishing segregated seating as well as offering entertainments specifically intended to draw female audiences. Owners restructured the pit, an area nearest the stage which at one time had been associated with loud and sometimes abusive male audiences, into an area where the elite displayed themselves in their finery. Playhouse proprietors relegated lower class theatergoers to gallery seating, out of the sight of polite ladies. But attempts at segregating patrons along class lines did not always succeed. The theaters frequently became sites of tension and conflict between the lower orders and elite patrons. Two “young vagabonds without either hats or shoes” caused a stir when they paid full price for admission to the “best seats” in the New Memphis Theater. Prostitutes also received criticism from the city papers for “insulting” ladies at the theaters.<sup>19</sup>

Theater operators turned toward new kinds of entertainments to help draw the right sort of patrons to their establishments. Richard Butsch shows how moral plays and entertainments proved central to bringing respectable women into theaters, which in turn fostered the growth of American consumerism. Theaters such as the New Memphis Theater, located on Jefferson Street, attempted to attract a middle-class and elite female clientele by offering morally elevating entertainments. This can be seen in an advertisement for performances by Peter Ritchings and his adopted daughter Caroline in January of 1861. The *Appeal* described Ritchings as one of the most “gentlemanly and dignified attaches of the stage,” and his daughter Caroline possessed of “purity of character” and “engaging manners.” In an age when the popular imagination

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<sup>19</sup> Butsch, “Bowery B’hoys and Matinee Ladies,” 386; Lawrence Levine, *High Brow/Low Brow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 60-62.

associated actresses with dissolute high society and prostitution, such an endorsement may have been necessary to attract respectable audiences. The advertisement continued:

Father and daughter will appear during the week, at the theater in this city, and all, especially the lady portion of the public, may expect a series of unobjectionable entertainments, presented in a style of aesthetic finish and elevation of tone not always apparent on the boards; in short, a cultivated and intellectual lady and gentleman will present before the public delineations that will develop chaste sentiments, and lofty manners.<sup>20</sup>

Such moral entertainments failed to purify the moral atmosphere of the city's theaters prior to the beginning of the Civil War. Rowdy patrons continued to attend these shows in large numbers. Progressive theater managers, like their merchant and restaurateur counterparts, remained a small but influential minority in the city. They succeeded, by the beginning of the Civil War, in carving out a small, but tenuous space suitable for the society of respectable female consumers.

On the eve of secession, the shopping district of Memphis seemed reasonably safe for elite women. Josie Underwood, a visitor to Memphis from Kentucky, recorded an unescorted shopping excursion in her diary just prior to the Civil War. Her route went from the eastern suburbs of the city, along Vance Street, and then north on Main to the central shopping district. She returned with some “little packages” and spoke much of her shopping and the beauty of the day to her sister and cousin. Such experiences became less common in coming years, as the population of disreputable women and drunken soldiers increased dramatically. Prostitutes claimed public space “by right of conquest” and threatened the respectability of both mercantile

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<sup>20</sup> Butsch, 384; *Appeal*, January 27, 1861.

spaces and the customers who frequented them<sup>21</sup>.

After Tennessee seceded from the union in April of 1861, the Bluff City quickly mobilized for war. Memphis's location on the Mississippi River, as well as its role as a storehouse for Southern cotton, convinced Confederate military officials of its importance to the war effort. Local men, swept up in the patriotic fervor of the early days of the war, volunteered for service in military units such as the Second Tennessee Infantry, known as the "Irish Regiment" for its large number of Irish volunteers. In the first months of the war, Memphis experienced the largest movement of people up to that point in its history; men trekked from the countryside into the city to enlist, Unionists departed for the North, and military units bivouacked nearby. Along with these came further additions to the city's sex worker population. Between April of 1861 and the summer of 1862, Confederate civic and military officials struggled to impose order on the growing population of prostitutes in the city.<sup>22</sup>

The sporting world of Memphis developed a volatile festive atmosphere in the spring and summer of 1861. Localities such as Jefferson and Washington Streets became the focus of police attention. In each of those locations brothels disturbed local residents with constant rows and violent outbursts. Local men went in for one last spree before enlisting for service in the Confederate Army; the city's brothels and saloons filled with visitors and instances of violence spiked during this period. In March Daniel Casey threw a rock at Madam Mary Miller, striking her in the head and severely wounding her. In late April, William Dodge assaulted Madam Moll Rose at her Jefferson Street establishment, an offense which sentenced him to fifty-three days on

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<sup>21</sup> Nancy Disher Baird, ed., *Josie Underwood's Civil Wary Diary* (The University Press of Kentucky, 2009), Jan. 29, 1861; *Memphis Bulletin*, April 30, 1863.

<sup>22</sup> Bond, *Memphis*, 50-51.

the chain gang.<sup>23</sup>

But these disturbances do not seem to have aroused as much anxiety among citizens as the public defiance of gender roles and propriety by roving troupes of harlots in the city's central commercial district. The papers and city authorities worried most over their belief that lewd women crowded the streets and “insulted” respectable women with obscene and masculine behavior. In May, four intoxicated sex workers rode up and down Main Street in a carriage driven by a “drunken fellow.” The party passed along the busiest portion of Main, “shouting, laughing uproariously, vociferating remarks upon individuals in the street, and as if this was not enough to call the public stare down upon them, waving a flag as they went.” In July of 1861, a “noisy party” of intoxicated courtesans “on a bender” careened through the city in a carriage, stopping at saloons along the way, “making a variety of noises, especially when they chanced to meet ladies.” The outbreak of “Obstreperous Crinoline” continued when the police stopped another hackload of prostitutes on a “spree” for creating a disturbance. The *Appeal* suggested their main offense was not merely reckless driving but the violation and flaunting of established norms of feminine behavior:

They drove with a rush; talked with a vigor unknown to the *ton*; puffed cigars as defiantly as Madame Dudevant, and indulged in smashes, juleps and cocktails at various saloons on their route, to an extent more calculated to excite astonishment at the extent of their draining powers than respect for their good morals.<sup>24</sup>

In September, police arrested prostitutes Lizzie Taylor, Sallie Smith, and Jane Mortes for driving along Main Street near Court Square while “giving vent to filthy and obscene language.”

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<sup>23</sup> *Daily Avalanche*, March 15, April 23, 1861.

<sup>24</sup> *Appeal*, May 23, July 3, August 1, 1861; *Avalanche*, July 2, 1861

The women employed Bob, the slave of William Warren, to drive them around on their “bender.” Bob joined the women in the calaboose. These daily carriage excursions not only violated respectability, they had a distressingly negative effect on the discipline of slaves.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, the increasingly martial atmosphere of Memphis appears to have rubbed off on the city's sex workers. Prostitutes began to emulate the pugilistic proclivities of sporting men. Notices of “Feminine prize fights” appeared in the Memphis papers. Late at night, a multitude of carriages congregated at the Worsham House Hotel at the corner of Main and Adams to follow prostitutes to arranged boxing matches at the Jackson Mound in South Memphis. Jackson Mound, the site of a series of Indian mounds outside the city limits, offered a park-like setting that served as a gathering place for Memphians. The tall, flat-topped mounds provided a dramatic setting for such sporting entertainments. These fights may have been organized and promoted by saloon keepers, who relied on such entertainments to boost sales of liquor but also to draw attention to their establishments' sexual offerings. The fights attracted crowds of “fast young men” with a “morbid taste for the brutal.” Such fights indicate the increasingly prominent position of sex workers in the city's masculine popular culture, as well as the necessity of demonstrating martial prowess to violent male customers. “Prize fights” signaled that prostitutes would not be so easily pushed around by customers or city authorities. The press presented the “notorious courtesans” who participated in these fights as “unsexed” and “brutally disgusting.”<sup>26</sup>

Prostitutes behaved in an “unsexed” manner by adopting male behaviors: untrammelled

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<sup>25</sup> *Appeal*, September 19, 1861.

<sup>26</sup> *Avalanche*, March 18, May 27, 1861; *Daily Argus*, March 27, 1861; For more on prize fighting, see Elliot J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Cornel University, 1986). Gorn finds few instances of women boxing during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Prostitutes sometimes stood at ringside, however. The frequency of female prize fighting in Memphis during this period is a subject in need of greater research.

sexuality, heavy drinking, tobacco use, and boxing. Memphis authorities viewed these behaviors as a greater threat to order than mere outbreaks of violence inside brothels. Such public displays had prompted Memphians to attack and publicly humiliate sex workers in the 1830s. The movement of disreputable women throughout the city and their adoption of masculine modes of behavior threatened the respectability of middle class and elite women. A concern with respectability stood at the center of middle-class culture, and the distinction between respectable and disreputable proved important to the formation and maintenance of class boundaries. As historian John Kasson has shown, respectability depended upon manners and where one was seen and with whom. These strictures fell more heavily on women. Respectable, unescorted women could not set foot in certain parts of the city, saloons foremost among them, but also areas frequented by prostitutes. With the major thoroughfares of the city crowded with women of ill-repute, either out on a stroll or loudly gallivanting about town in carriages, the respectability of middle-class women came under threat. The increasingly public activities of prostitutes brought on by the dislocations of the war remade the geography of the city into one which threatened the reputations of respectable women and the livelihoods of merchants.<sup>27</sup>

Sex workers also began to intrude on the city's entertainment district. Since the late 1840s, a playhouse on the corner of Center Alley and Washington Street, known as the Washington Street Theater, served as the city's premier playhouse. Edwin Booth, among other notables, had performed here, but by 1859 the theater ceased operation as a "regular theater" and began operating as a varieties theater. According to A.R. James, the playhouse "lost its high caste." By early 1861 this theater came under the management of A.D. Gates, who transformed

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<sup>27</sup> Butsch, "Bowery B'hoys and Matinee Ladies," 375-376; Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*, 132-133.



the establishment into a varieties theater that appealed to a less reputable clientele. During the week varieties acts and “burnt cork theater” predominated, including an act that featured Julia Barton, an “unsexed woman” who “did the prima donna business” on the boards. Three nights a week Gates gave a barn dance, an attraction that appealed to the regiments of sex workers thronging the city. In addition to theatrical performances and dances, Gates retailed liquor to his patrons, including minors. The editor of the *Avalanche* described the theater as a place where “dissolute men and lewd women hold their midnight orgies” and an “eyesore to the respectable portion of the community.” The Appeal alleged that one-third of all the cases brought before the recorder's court originated at Gates's barn dances. Violent outbursts, often stemming from sex worker rivalries, marred these events. A rival of James Dalton, a barkeeper at the establishment, shot him in the alley behind the theater in argument over a woman. Although arrested in March for creating a nuisance and retailing liquor to minors, A.D. Gates and his staff continued operating the theater as a plebeian dance hall as late as December of 1861.<sup>28</sup>

In an attempt to put a stop to the activities of prostitutes, authorities responded by imposing a fine of fifty dollars on hack drivers who conveyed prostitutes through the city. Aldermen quickly voted the ordinance down on the grounds that “if they were not allowed to ride, they would walk, which would tend to increase rather than diminish immorality.” Solving the problem of how to restrict the movement of prostitutes proved challenging. Casting about for a way to control these women, the aldermen passed an ordinance authorizing the creation of a special police force to monitor the city's bawdy houses. These men would be posted outside brothels and paid through a fifty-dollar monthly tax levied on each house of ill-fame. Madams

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<sup>28</sup> James, *Standard History of Memphis*, 471; *Avalanche*, February 26, March 5, 1861; *Argus*, February 27, 1861; *Appeal*, December 1, 1861.

who refused or failed to pay the tax would be “suppressed.”<sup>29</sup>

The *Appeal* blasted the tax as “illegal” and “not worth the paper it is written upon.” Suppressing houses of ill-fame did not outrage the editor, but taxing them did, which gave them legal sanction. Many brothel keepers ignored the tax, resulting in a “war upon bawdy houses” by the police in July and August. During that period the police arrested many sex workers for their refusal to pay the monthly tax. The ultimate outcome of the “bawdy house war” is unknown, since arrest records for 1861 are incomplete, but it appears to have been unsuccessful, as evidenced by the repeal of the ordinance creating a special police force in late August. The renewed effort to control lewd women in early Confederate Memphis had failed. By the fall of 1861, the city's brothels remained open and streetwalkers continued to operate in the main thoroughfares, alleys and saloons. Between the middle of November and the end of 1861, rowdy women and prostitutes made up 118 arrests or about sixteen percent of all individuals brought before the city recorder.<sup>30</sup>

Indiscretions among the city's secessionists revealed that prostitutes consorted not only with stevedores, laborers, and steamboat men, but members of the political and social elite. Alderman Patrick Mahoney, a Confederate volunteer, became embroiled in a scandal after a merchant discovered him having sexual intercourse with a free black servant in the employ of Madam Mary Miller. The city attorney refused to prosecute him, likely because to do so would have exposed many other prominent Memphians to prosecution. It also had become apparent to Confederate military authorities that public women threatened military discipline by plying soldiers and officers with liquor, depriving them of their money, health, and sometimes their

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., August 6, 9, 1861.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., August 29, 1861; arrest figures are taken from Memphis Recorder Docket, 1861-1862, SCA.

senses.<sup>31</sup>

The high profile murder of Hattie Rogers in October of 1861 exemplified the dangers inherent in the relationships between elite men and prostitutes. Rogers, a twenty-two year old who boarded in the brothel of Nannie McGinnis on Washington Street, became the object of obsession for Armand Selby, a nineteen-year old former West Point cadet turned Confederate officer in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tennessee Infantry. Louis Selby, Armand's father, formerly served as a judge and state legislator in Louisiana, and after moving to Memphis, served as an alderman. The Selby family stood in a place of prominence in Memphis political and civic life; Louis Selby also worked to promote the construction of railroads and other civic improvements. When the Tennessee seceded, the family enthusiastically supported the Confederacy. While encamped at Memphis with his regiment, Armand frequented the brothel of Nannie McGinnis and developed a tumultuous relationship with Rogers. Selby's fellow officers described him as exhibiting some of the outward characteristics of “the b'hoys,” the youth culture which frequented saloons, theaters, brothels and other urban entertainments. Testimony and family history indicates he may also have been bipolar. At one moment he would exult joyously over Rogers and later weep like a child over his perception that she had been unfaithful to him. On many days Selby would sit across the street from the brothel in the storeroom of a dyer, a Mr. Hennish, and observe the activities of Rogers.<sup>32</sup>

The captain of a company in Selby's unit testified that Selby “was often and long absent from the company of which he was lieutenant,” and that he would threaten other soldiers with a pistol when they attempted to carry out orders he disagreed with. Another deposition from

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<sup>31</sup> *Appeal*, March 10, 12, 17, 19, 1861.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, October 15, December 13, 1861.

Selby's unit claimed that

he carried about him the picture of the girl he afterward killed; he would sit gazing at it for long intervals; he believed he loved the girl and would marry her if he had a chance; he would sometimes stand with the picture in his hand and talk to it; say he loved the girl it represented and would die for her. On some occasions he had expressed himself tired of the world, and threatened to put an end to his life putting a pistol to his head.

Judge Louis Selby refused to allow his son any connection with Hattie Rogers. But Armand's repeated refusals to quit the woman forced the anxious father to offer him “\$25,000 and a nigger or two take the girl and go away where nobody would know them.” Armand's increasingly public involvement with a woman of the town crossed the line from a youthful peccadillo to a family embarrassment. But Armand persisted in his monomaniacal behavior, resulting in an “alienation between the father and son.”<sup>33</sup>

Rogers seemed reluctant to have any connection with the younger Selby beyond an economic one. She may have seen Selby as nothing more than a repeat customer. She indulged his moods, agreeing to sit for repeated daguerreotype portraits after he would smash each in a rage. Madam McGinnis claimed the two fell “crazy in love with each other,” but there is no other evidence to suggest that Rodgers had any emotional connection to her would-be lover. Days before the murder, Hattie agreed to “sleep with” Selby, but then later refused. Selby beat her severely for her refusal. For several days afterward, the two did not see each other. A friend of Selby's implored Rogers to be “friends” with Armand, for the sake of her life.<sup>34</sup>

Days later, in a rage, Selby entered the bedroom of Rogers and found her convalescing

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

from the beating he had previously given her. A letter sent by his commanding officer instructing Selby to return to his command or resign pushed him over the edge. Selby shot Rogers in the back, penetrating her heart; she died ten minutes later. Selby escaped to Hernando, Mississippi, where Memphis detectives apprehended him. The court found him to be of unsound mind, stripped him of his rank, and dismissed him from the service. Selby did not face any criminal charges for the murder of Hattie Rogers and escaped jail time. He later reenlisted with a Louisiana regiment and died during the war.<sup>35</sup>

News also spread throughout the city that a marriage between a “beautiful courtesan” and an Arkansas planter had ended in tragedy. Alice Simpson, also known as Mary Bowen, married William L. Porter in Memphis in March. Simpson and her husband successfully concealed her past from friends and family for a time, but the arrival of an individual in the neighborhood who knew Simpson exposed her former life. Simpson had “committed the sin for which there is no earthly pardon,” and her new relatives “denounced her and demanded of her husband that she should be driven like Hagar to the desert.” She moved initially to Vicksburg, working in a brothel there, but eventually returned to Memphis. She attempted to return to the “path of virtue” by taking up sewing, but in a matter of days after settling on Vance street she took an overdose of morphine and died. The Hattie Rogers and Alice Simpson episodes underscored one of the central anxieties of prostitution for middle-class Memphians: that sex workers could threaten the reputations of young men and families by infiltrating polite society. Prostitutes threatened public order, gender norms, and class boundaries.<sup>36</sup>

The loosening of sexual mores in the rapidly urbanizing and militarizing Memphis also

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<sup>35</sup> *Appeal*, December 13, 1861.

<sup>36</sup> *Appeal*, December 5, 1861; 1860 U.S. Census, Vicksburg, Warren County, Mississippi.

threatened the moral health of the community in subtler ways. Single young women commonly gave daguerreotypes or ambrotypes of themselves to male admirers departing for Confederate service. This “imprudent” practice received condemnation from middle-class observers on the grounds that it cheapened young women and potentially threatened their virtue. The editor of the *Appeal* warned young women never to give their daguerreotype to gentlemen friends, including those marching off to war. Considering it “indelicate in the highest degree,” the editor remarked that “we are astonished that any young girl should hold herself as cheap as this.” The editorial voiced concern over the wrong impression given by such a practice, particularly in an environment becoming increasingly saturated with sexualized depictions of women, both written and visual.<sup>37</sup>

By mid-century, pornographic and “obscene” publications proliferated throughout the United States thanks to improved printing technology and a growing urban market of sporting men. Bawdy publications circulated in the growing river town since at least the early 1850s. Men who engaged in the “exalted vocation” of selling guidebooks to New Orleans brothels distributed their wares in major cities along the Mississippi River as early as 1850. These books gave the addresses of brothels, described the madams or women employed there, and sometimes provided images of the inmates. Newsstands, saloons, barbershops, or other areas where men congregated offered these books for sale. Peddlers did not sell guidebooks to Memphis brothels, but pornographers on the Bluff did traffic in other ribald materials. Popular written pornographic works sold by smut dealers included *Fanny Hill*, *The Cabinet of Venus* and *The Lustful Turk*, among others. The St. Louis *Joker's Budget*, little more than a rumor mill and advertising sheet

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<sup>37</sup> *Appeal*, May 29, 1861.

for gambling halls and brothels, had been in circulation along the Mississippi for years as well. The *Budget*, branded an “infamous publication” which pandered to the “tastes of the most depraved of both sexes” sold several hundred copies a week in Memphis by 1861.<sup>38</sup>

But apart from guides to New Orleans brothels and the *Joker's Budget*, which authorities attempted at times to suppress, selling arousing pictures or books did not become common in Memphis until the eve of the Civil War. In December of 1860 police arrested F.C. Miran for selling “obscene books” in the city streets and fined him eleven dollars. Two months later, police apprehended John O'Neill, “a thing in coat and pants, who called himself a man,” for selling “filthy books and obscene pictures” on the levee and at the wharf-boats docked at the landing. O'Neill protested his arrest, claiming he had “for seven years been selling such things on the river at various places, and had never been arrested before.” For violating public decency, O'Neill received twenty-three days on the chain gang. As soon as these merchants appeared, city authorities quickly arrested and prosecuted them.<sup>39</sup>

As the war wore on, the market for arousing books and pictures grew among soldiers stationed in Memphis. The onset of the war unleashed a tide of pornographic materials in the city, one that Memphians, whether secessionist or unionist, could not hope to control. Military authorities in other cities attempted to stamp out the widespread consumption of these materials, but with little success. Marsena Patrick, the provost marshal general of the Army of the Potomac, made a bonfire in which he burned “a large quantity” of obscene books seized from soldiers. However, little effort to stamp out the retail of these publications appears to have taken place in

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<sup>38</sup> Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 130; *Mississippi Free Trader*, August 21, 1850; Lowry, *The Story the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell*, 56; *Argus*, February 7, 1861.

<sup>39</sup> *Appeal*, February 28, March 1, 1861.

occupied Memphis. This especially became the case after the city fell to Union forces in 1862.

Merchants from New Orleans began “doing a big trade” in “bawdy books and pictures” in a store on Main and on the levee. Authorities did not arrest these dealers. In 1863, the *Bulletin* remarked on the ubiquity of bawdy books and pictures being retailed in the city:

The display of highly colored daubs and photographs of naked women, obscene groups, etc., in the windows and upon the stands of our stationers, booksellers, and newsdealers has become most noticeable common and deserving of public attention and censure. We have long been accustomed to see such, upon a larger plan, hung about the walls of grogshops, club rooms, and places visited only by the male sex, but when they are to be introduced into the street windows and compiled into albums, it is certainly carrying the thing too far – altogether too far.<sup>40</sup>

Public fears of the evil effects of arousing imagery and pornographic publications emerged out of a conception promoted by an emerging group of health reformers that linked excessive sexual excitement and masturbation with insanity. According to the medical opinion of the time, the apparently insane behavior of Armand Selby, as well as his obsession with the daguerreotype of Hattie Rogers, resulted from excessive sexual desire and “onanism.” Physicians and purveyors of this reform physiology believed masturbation, also referred to as “self-abuse” or “the fatal vice,” resulted inevitably in debility, madness, and disease. Masturbation, these reformers believed, presented greater dangers than engaging in sex with prostitutes. In the late 1850s, advertisements for a medical treatise addressing “the vicious habits acquired during the critical passage from youth to manhood” appeared in the *Appeal*. For twelve cents, the book promised a “permanent cure” for those suffering from diseases brought on by “self-abuse.” Quack remedies such as the “Cherokee Cure” also promised a cure for bodily disorders

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<sup>40</sup> Lowry, *The Story the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell*, 54-55; Brock, “Memphis's Nymphs Du Pavé,” 65.



contracted from engaging in “self-pollution.” Advertisements for the “Cherokee Cure” became particularly common in the *Appeal* after the beginning of the war, when young men, removed from family supervision, faced the temptations presented by saloons, brothels, and pornography merchants.<sup>41</sup>

In early 1862, Confederate Memphis faced the prospect of Northern invasion. In March, General Braxton Bragg placed the city under martial law. Memphis and its vicinity swelled with Confederate troops in preparation for engagements at Shiloh, Fort Pillow, and Island Number 10. In April, a stream of wounded from Shiloh inundated the city's hospitals. Again, the city faced another spike in prostitution, violent crime, and public drunkenness. The Confederate response to houses of ill-fame shifted from reacting to outbreaks of disorder to outright prohibition. Primarily concerned with maintaining discipline, the Confederate military placed rigid controls on the city's saloons and brothels. The first stirrings of this change can be seen in January when the city council issued an order prohibiting “unlawful assemblages,” an edict which applied to “all balls, parties, and other collections of persons, for amusement in and about any notorious house of ill-fame.” Broadly worded, the ordinance considered any participant at such parties to be guilty of a misdemeanor and fined no more than twenty-five dollars. Provost Marshal Lewis D. McKisick placed a ban on the retailing of liquor, which local papers referred to as a “blockade.” Saloons such as the “Brilliant Saloon” publicly changed over to retailing coffee, tea and chocolate, but others, particularly more out of the way doggeries, continued retailing cheap whiskey.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> For connection between masturbation and insanity, see Horowitz, *Rereading Sex*, Chapter 5: “The Masturbation Scare and the Rise of Reform Physiology”; *Appeal*, April 15, 1858, January 3, 7, passim.

<sup>42</sup> *Appeal*, January 11, May 31 1862; John E. Harkins, *Historic Shelby County: An Illustrated History* (West Tennessee Historical Society, 2008), 65.

On March 11, the provost marshal warned all brothel proprietors “no visitors would be allowed.” The following day, the deputy provost marshal arrested eighteen Confederate troops in brothels throughout Memphis. Hack drivers also came under close surveillance to prevent them from conveying women of “improper character” through the city. Daily brothel raids continued, much to the gratification of local moralists, who noted a change in the city's character. By the beginning of June, the *Appeal*, with tongue firmly planted in cheek, lamented that “times are distressingly moral.” Normal police enforcement, partnered with the activities of military police, proved more successful than previous efforts by civil authorities in maintaining some semblance of public and military order. The relative quiet by early June may have also been the result of the withdrawal of large numbers of troops from the vicinity of Memphis to Vicksburg. Whatever its cause, it would be short lived.<sup>43</sup>

In May of 1862, Memphians waited anxiously for what would come next. The fall of Island Number 10 in April, an important fortification preventing the movement of Union gunboats down the Mississippi, opened the way for an assault on Memphis by water. To make matters worse for the city's secessionists, New Orleans fell to Union forces three weeks later. “We expect their gunboats daily here and I don't know why they delay so long,” wrote Anna Kirtland to her friend Harriet R. Palmer. In letters to friends Kirtland complained of Confederate military rule in Memphis, at having to present passes “like darkees” to sentinels posted around the city. The days of pleasure riding about town to see the Confederate army camps had long gone. The women of Memphis continued, however, to shop. Even as distant artillery fire echoed like rolling thunder, the *Appeal* reported “the ladies were busy shopping.” With the streets rigidly

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<sup>43</sup> *Appeal*, March 14, 15, May 29, June 1, 1862.

controlled by military authorities and prostitutes kept under house arrest, Memphis women could safely promenade and shop as if the fighting going on a day's journey away did not concern them.<sup>44</sup>

Despite having to present passes like slaves, and the imminent arrival of federal troops, Memphis women may have counted themselves more fortunate than women in New Orleans. The commanding officer in New Orleans, General Benjamin Butler, resented the way in which New Orleans ladies withdrew from church pews if Union troops sat nearby, crossed the street rather than share a sidewalk with a federal soldier, or leave streetcars boarded by Yankee officers. Butler responded to this behavior by issuing Order Number 28, which decreed that any woman who showed contempt for any officer or soldier “shall be regarded and held liable to be treated as a woman of the town plying her avocation.” The order treated vocal secessionist women as prostitutes. Butler insisted, in keeping with an ideology of separate spheres, that secessionist women keep their views private. If women could not comport themselves in a ladylike manner, with deference, decorum, and civility, they would be treated like harlots. This apparent insult to feminine virtue outraged southerners and “Beast Butler” became synonymous with the cruel, vulgar rule of yankeedom. The imminent arrival of Union forces in Memphis intensified the response to Butler's order. “Such is the official license to an invading Yankee soldiery,” the *Appeal* thundered, “to outrage the women of the South as common harlots, because they still cling with love and patriotism to the cause of their country!” Secessionist women in the Bluff City may have regarded this with some apprehension, particularly now that Yankee conquest

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<sup>44</sup> Anna E. Kirtland to Harriet R. Palmer, May 14, 1862 in *A World Turned Upside Down: The Palmers of South Santee, 1818-1881* (University of South Carolina Press, 1996); *Appeal*, May 31, 1862.

seemed imminent.<sup>45</sup>

A month later the federal behemoth arrived in the form of a flotilla of gunboats. After a brief, one-sided naval engagement, Memphis fell to federal forces. The collapse of Confederate Memphis would alter the course of the sex trade in Memphis for the duration of the war and beyond. Federal occupation increased the magnitude of prostitution in the city and also changed how authorities attempted to regulate it. Union military authorities, for the first two years of occupation, took a more lax attitude toward prostitution than the Confederates. Raids intended to remove prostitutes from the city failed. Military authorities replaced this with a system of unofficial toleration, which authorities considered a “necessary evil.” Only after courtesans infiltrated the haunts of elite officers, their wives, and respectable society did the attitude of Union authorities change. This, coupled with the toll of venereal disease and the dangers posed by ill-disciplined soldiers, required a solution that would both regulate prostitution through licensing and enforce a strict separation of sex workers from “ladies” in public.<sup>46</sup>

Observers noted the wild sexual atmosphere of the city in the days and weeks following the capture of Memphis. The correspondent of the Cincinnati *Commercial* described Memphis under federal occupation as “courtesan cursed” and inhabited by a “crew of pimps, sharpers and pickpockets” who “composed the principal portion of its male population.” A correspondent for the Cincinnati *Gazette* went further in his condemnation of the state of Memphis during federal occupation, describing a city “reeking with all manner of uncleanness, literally and metaphorically,” where “the eyes of pure women are offended by the placards of bawdy-house

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<sup>45</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 208-210; Catherine Clinton, *Public Women and the Confederacy* (Marquette University Press, 1999), 35-37; *Appeal*, May 21, 1862.

<sup>46</sup> Bond, *Memphis in Black and White*, 52.

fortune tellers and quack doctors on every street corner, and their ears insulted by the drunken imprecations of a filthy rabble, in the broad light of day.” The *Memphis Bulletin* added to the chorus, characterizing the city as a “perfect beehive” of prostitutes who consorted with “civil and military officers in broad daylight.”<sup>47</sup>

These descriptions seem exaggerated, but less than a week after the capture of the city, authorities turned their attention toward suppressing not Confederate partisans, but prostitutes. On June 11, five days after the Battle of Memphis, military authorities and the police force began cooperating in measures to prevent “lewd women” from walking the streets at night “much to the annoyance of the ladies.” Three days later, a reporter for the *Avalanche* noted the police court “very dull,” and except for the “belligerent women,” it would “scarcely be opened at all.” That same day, the police shuttered a brothel kept by Puss Pettus. The editor of the *Avalanche* wondered why such a “sink of iniquity” had been tolerated for so long on Main Street and in the heart of the city. Pettus defiantly reopened her establishment, but the provost marshal closed it permanently a week later. On June 17, the Provost Marshal issued a proclamation prohibiting prostitutes from conversing with soldiers while on duty and walking the streets after sunset. Violation of this proclamation resulted in banishment across the river to Arkansas. After a shooting in her establishment, the military permanently closed Helen Blanche's brothel. Undeterred, Blanche relocated to St. Louis and opened a saloon that may have doubled as a whorehouse in the city's red light district. Within two weeks, two Memphis brothels had been completely suppressed by the military police and at least four other courtesans shipped across the river to Arkansas.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *Appeal*, February 28, June 27 1863; Lowry, *The Story the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell*, 84.

<sup>48</sup> *Avalanche*, June 11, 23 1862; U.S. IRS Tax Assessment Lists, Missouri, 1862, District 1, 112.

These measures only temporarily halted the growth of the licentious class of Memphis. The federal invasion by water had paved the way for another. Soon, steamboats carrying loads of prostitutes from St. Louis, Chicago, and cities on the Ohio River arrived in the city. “It has almost become proverbial,” a reporter opined, “that Memphis is the great rendezvous for prostitutes and 'pimps.’” The reporter claimed “those creatures” and their “lords” had taken possession of the city. The military camps that dotted the environs of Memphis continued to lure prostitutes. An area on the east side of town, near the intersection of Poplar and Manassas, became particularly annoying to city residents. The location of a military encampment, but also a railroad depot and city market, civilians, soldiers, and sex workers alike frequented this area. Residents complained of the “infamous indecencies” of prostitutes working in the vicinity. An attempt by Captain Sullivan of the provost guard to arrest these women met with resistance from brick-throwing men. Even the bridges which spanned the bayou Gayoso became the scene of “grossly indecent conduct” between sex workers and soldiers.<sup>49</sup>

Despite attempts to restore order, evidence indicates that federal officers encouraged the proliferation of prostitution. “Accounts we have heard of [federal troops'] doings in and about Memphis are scandalous,” Lucy French recorded in her diary in August of 1862. Along with plundering stock, tearing up farmland, and “running off” slaves, French recorded that Union troops converted “Mrs. William's (Dawson's) beautiful place for a brothel for the federal officers.” Eliza M. Dawson (née Williams), a wealthy planter and widow of William M. Dawson, a Whig Senator from Georgia, owned a home in Memphis and a plantation in Mississippi. Her Memphis house, which stood at the head of Adams Street beyond the city limits, had likely been

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<sup>49</sup> Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldiers of the Union* (Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 260; Brock, “Memphis's Nymphs Du Pave,” 64.

targeted by federal troops because of her support for the Confederacy, but also her material wealth. No other evidence has been found supporting the claim that federal officers used Dawson's home as a brothel. French may have simply heard a rumor. However, given the laxity of enforcement that began to prevail in late 1862, as well as the frequency with which federal officers ignored rules regarding prostitutes, it is probable officers used her home as a place of lodging for their mistresses. Following the war, Eliza Dawson claimed \$55,000 in damages from federal troops to her Memphis and Mississippi homes; officials disallowed them on the grounds of her disloyalty.<sup>50</sup>

The accounts of rank and file soldiers, the main clientele of sex workers, offer a vivid glimpse into the loose sexual atmosphere of the city under federal occupation, and of the futile attempts by military authorities to control it. Shortly after arriving in Memphis, Corporal George Cadman of the 39<sup>th</sup> Ohio Volunteer Infantry wrote to his wife of the scene that transpired in camp:

Women and whisky are plentiful here, and our men had been so long debarred from both that it did not take long for them to raise hell generally. Never did I see such a scene before in my life and I hope to God I never may again. For some days, in spite of all effort of the Colonel, who did his utmost to preserve discipline, the camp was one wild scene of debauchery . . . . Drunkenness was the order of the day, so you may form an idea of what the camp was like; and with some hundreds of the most abandoned women in the world to add to their evil influence.<sup>51</sup>

Cadman recorded that after order had been restored in camp, women continued to offer

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<sup>50</sup> *The Lucy Virginia French Diary*, August 10, 1862, Tennessee State Library & Archives; *Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the Fifty-First Congress, First Session* Volume 21, Part 4 (Washington, 1889), 3842

<sup>51</sup> George Hovey Cadman to Esther Cooper Cadman, Memphis, May 18, 1863, George Hovey Cadman Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Archives, Chapel Hill.

themselves and a bottle of whiskey to soldiers standing guard for a dollar.<sup>52</sup>

Another observer, Thomas Hannah, Jr. of the 95<sup>th</sup> Illinois Infantry, served as ward master at Adams General Hospital Number 3 in Memphis. From his post on the corner of Adams and Main, an area in the heart of the city's entertainment and vice district, Hannah daily witnessed the activities of prostitutes and drunken soldiers passing by on the streets below. The revelry going on in the streets, saloons, and brothels offered a shocking contrast to the wounded and dying surrounding him. Hannah wrote to his wife that Memphis society “is in such a disorganised state that everyone seems to think of none but themselves and they come and go to every place of amusement and enjoy themselves without a thought for the sufferings that are all around them on every hand.” Hannah considered Memphis “a wicked place” where “every night you can hear the shout of drunken revelry and sin every saloone [sic] hall ally [sic] and corner you can look upon the drunken soldier and citizen who are indulging in debauchery and sin and ruining their imortal [sic] soul.” Hannah described the theaters, dancing halls and places of amusement as being crowded by “gay and thoughtless [people] who do not seem to have a thought for any but themselves.” Hannah struggled to describe the wild, daily displays of disorder to his wife. “It really seems,” he concluded in a letter in March of 1863, “that most all have forgotten [sic] that there is a God and that they must be judged some day of the deeds done in the body.”<sup>53</sup>

From his hospital window, Hannah looked down into the surrounding saloons and alleys. His account of inebriated soldiers, open businesses, and lewd women set against the pealing of church bells on a Sunday paints a vivid picture of a rowdy city under military occupation:

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Hannah to Elizabeth Hannah, January 31, March 12, 1863, courtesy of the family of Robert Huntoon Hannah, provided by Michael Bryan Fiske.



I have sat at my window nearly all day and looked out into the streets [sic] it is a Beautiful day and I here the church bells and see so many on there ways to there respective churches - then I see many with there shops thrown open and they are transacting buisness [sic] the same as if this was not gods holy sabath day yes I can look out into a shoemakers and taylers shop and I see them stiching and peging away then I can look into the saloons those curse holes of infamy and vice and see our soldiers enter and come out and go staggering along the sidewalk cursing and swareing [sic] or singing some drunken [song] and how sory and I think oh if his poor wife mother or sister could see him in such a state what tears of bitterness they would weep then I can often see these abandoned and bad women pass along drunk and oh the Horrible speaches [sic] they will make if they find anyone low enough to stop and fool with them this town is full of such women and it is hard to tell when you meet a true virtuous [sic] woman well my dear after looking upon such scenes as these untill I became disgusted and allmost ashamed that I belonged to the human race.<sup>54</sup>

Hannah's remark, "it is hard to tell when you meet a true virtuous [sic] woman" resulted not only from the large number of sex workers in the city, but also the manner of dress adopted by prostitutes, a style no different from the mode worn by respectable women. Hannah reported witnessing a "well dressed and good looking" woman who became intoxicated and "utered [sic] the most profane Oaths and disgusting language I ever herd [sic] come from human lips." He then watched as the woman "pulled up her cloths to sh[it] in the sight of about 100 persons." The authorities quickly apprehended the woman, placed her on a dray, and held her down while being hauled away to prevent her from continuing to expose herself. "You cannot imagine how bad I felt," Hannah added.<sup>55</sup>

For Hannah, the only virtuous women lived far away from such public scenes, fulfilling their feminine roles in a domestic setting. Whenever Hannah mentioned a sex worker in the street, he contrasted her with his pure wife by gazing intently at her photograph. "When I have

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<sup>54</sup> Thomas Hannah to Elizabeth Hannah, April 10, 1863.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

seen those harlots of women,” he wrote to his wife, “so many of them in the streets [sic] and see how [base] and low they were my heart has been pained [sic] and has [only] found relief when I thought of my pure and good wife that was so far away from such [scenes] in a peaceful [sic] and quiet home.”<sup>56</sup>

Other accounts highlight the difficulty in distinguishing between prostitutes and ordinary women. A correspondent from an out-of-state newspaper described the cyprians that flocked the city as “young and comely” and “expensively dressed, though frequently with sober and excellent taste.”<sup>57</sup> Other visitors to Memphis found the city's female inhabitants comporting themselves in a flashy manner totally unsuited to norms of respectable dress promoted by middle class reformers. Lillian Foster, who traveled through Memphis in 1859, noted the presence of “quite a number of pretty ladies,” but observed “too many gay and light colors in street costume, and not always harmoniously arranged, which, instead of heightening and bringing out the effects of a woman's charms and natural gifts of person, detract therefrom.” Foster considered “grave colors” more “elegant and becoming.” The expensive and magnificent mode adopted by so many Memphis women displayed “mere barbarian luxury.” An English visitor found Memphis women to be physically attractive, but given to dressing in styles “a French milliner would not allow a *lady* to buy, simply because they were *portées par la demi-monde*,” or the styles worn by high society courtesans. This madness for indecent French fashions also carried over into amusements, which Memphians embraced in imitation of the *beau monde* of Paris.<sup>58</sup>

An article in the *Bulletin* further underscored the difficulty in telling prostitutes apart

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> *Avalanche*, June 25, 1862

<sup>58</sup> Lillian Foster, *Way-Side Glimpses, North and South* (New York, 1860), 175; Therese Yelverton, *Teresina in America*, Vol. 2 (London, 1875), 251-252.

from respectable women. Entitled “A Lounge Along Main Street – Every Variety of Female Loveliness,” the reporter enlivened a slow news day with a titillating description of the women who thronged the city's central business district. He described

Fair daughters of Israel; dark-eyed Italian women, stout teutonic belles, rosy-cheeked northern girls, sooty venuses in gaudy garments, gay and saucy mulattos, pallid refugee women, and many fair daughters of Memphis, with their finely developed forms, dark liquid eyes and abundant tresses . . . . The dresses [they wear], though often rich, are, as a general rule, tawdry, ill-fitting, and trimmed without taste.<sup>59</sup>

George Cadman also described Memphis women in a manner that suggests difficulty in determining virtue from disrepute. Cadman described the women of Memphis as “ugly” due to their addiction to “chawing snuff” and “tight lacing,” or the practice of wearing corsets. It is not clear if Cadman observed sex workers or everyday women, but he recorded visiting the saloons in order to “look at the girls” and have a few ales. As has been discussed above, middle-class norms of behavior marked chewing or smoking tobacco as a masculine and lewd habit for women. The corset, however, symbolized both respectability and indecency. Corsets signaled respectable dress and even the height of fashion; the notion of the “loose woman” erived from prostitutes who did not wear corsets as a way of enticing customers. But moral reformers such as Orson Fowler also attacked corsets as promoting impure thoughts in men and women by revealing the body's shape. Memphis prostitutes, like most Memphis women, probably wore corsets, particularly if we accept as true the claim that many cyprians dressed expensively and fashionably. George Cadman believed the practice of wearing tight corsets prevailed in Memphis

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<sup>59</sup> *Bulletin*, March 19, 1865

more so than any other place he had visited. He also wrote to his wife that Memphis women “lay the paint on so thick that to me it appears disgusting.” The practice of wearing “paint,” enamel, or a “false face” came also to be strongly associated with vice. Kathy Peiss shows how the “enameling studio” developed a reputation as the haunt of dissolute high society, a place to be shunned by respectable young ladies. Taken together, these sources suggest the great difficulty in distinguishing respectable women from prostitutes on the city streets.<sup>60</sup>

References to nattily-clad cyprians in fashionable toggery also express the class and gender resentments at the heart of panics over prostitution. Anxiety and anger over independent women had, in part, driven “brothel bullies” to attack prostitutes in the years before the war. Well-dressed, independent women not only violated gender norms, but also displayed themselves in their finery, an act which bred resentment. Newspaper editors and reporters littered their critiques of prostitutes with snide classist language, such as references to the “haut ton” or “gentry,” terms offensive to the democratic sensibilities of Americans. In an article on Ida Brown, a Memphis prostitute who overdosed on morphine in December of 1863, the reporter for the *Bulletin* expressed dismay at her “furnished room, wardrobe and jewelry.” The reporter noted that at the time of her death Brown had “40.00 left,” three times what a Union soldier received monthly.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> George Hovey Cadman Correspondence, September 23, 1863; Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 27, 53; Orson Fowler, *Intemperance and Tight-lacing* (New York, 1846). Victorian etiquette manuals presented painted women as the antithesis of respectability and republican institutions. See Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (Yale University Press, 1982), xiv-xv.

<sup>61</sup> *Bulletin*, December 24, 1863. Disgust with sex workers' displays of finery may have fueled the destruction that accompanied army brothel raids. Army details sent to raid houses of prostitution devolved into little more than sanctioned brothel riots; the “brothel bullies” who had terrorized prostitutes before the war now received official sanction to destroy their places of business. Raids on brothels by military authorities were accompanied by the total destruction of the furniture and crockery of the proprietress; shredded sofas, bedding and mirrors were heaped in the streets while casks of champagne were seized or dumped into the bayou.

The fashionable dress of prostitutes only heightened concerns over their entry into public spaces where they could pass for respectable women. This posed problems for merchants, who relied on the business of respectable women. Public conveyances, which carried middle-class women from the suburbs into the city to conduct shopping also became the preserve of prostitutes. The *Bulletin* remarked that omnibuses and public hacks became the realm of sex workers “by right of conquest, and ladies fear to ride on them fearing to be classed with them.” The owner of the Gayoso House placed an ad in the city's papers stating, “ladies unaccompanied by gentlemen will not be admitted unless an old acquaintance or introduced by a responsible party.”<sup>62</sup> Thomas Hannah noted the theaters had become disreputable places to visit, grouping them with brothels and saloons, where gambling and “all maners [sic] of wickedness” took place. When Hannah's wife Elizabeth suggested visiting him, Hannah flatly refused on the grounds that Memphis was much too dangerous for an unescorted woman:

I should feel most wretched to know that you my wife and dear lady friend wear [sic] in this cursed of all places without a true man for your protector and myself denied the privelage [sic] of escorting you safely back dont think of coming . . . I chearfully [sic] deny myself that great pleasure of seeing you for the satisfaction of knowing that you are safe outside of this wicked and hell bound community<sup>63</sup>

At best incompetent and at worst corrupt, Union officers did not help the situation in Memphis. The more strict rule of General Sherman gave way to the lax governance of General Stephen Hurlbut in November of 1862. A southerner by birth, Hurlbut lived for two decades in Illinois, where he had moderate success as a Republican politician. Despite lacking a great deal

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<sup>62</sup> Brock, “Memphis's Nymphs Du Pavé,” 64.

<sup>63</sup> *Bulletin*, April 30, 1863; Lowry, *The Story the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell*, 84; Thomas Hannah to Elizabeth Hannah, February 9, 1863.

of ability as a leader, he became a confidant of the president, and received an appointment as a brigadier general. A strong affection for alcohol proved Hurlbut's chief failing. The Memphis correspondent for the Cincinnati *Commercial* described Hurlbut as a “daily spectacle of disgusting drunkenness.” Hurlbut drank publicly and comported himself in a wild and obnoxious manner. Rumor of Hurlbut's near constant state of intoxication became the subject of talk throughout Memphis during 1862 and 1863.<sup>64</sup>

Hurlbut also surrounded himself with incompetent and corrupt men. Chief among these, his assistant adjutant general, Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Binmore. Born in England, Binmore formerly worked as a journalist with the St. Louis *Republican*, a political organ of Stephen A. Douglas. Prior to accepting a secretarial position in the Union army, Binmore served as Douglas's private secretary. Binmore also drank heavily, behaved in a manner that some considered “seedy,” and frequented prostitutes. The men put in command of Memphis beginning in November of 1862 behaved little differently than freewheeling sporting men.<sup>65</sup>

Given Hurlbut's own attitude toward revelry, probably no semblance of order could have been restored had it not been for Brigadier General James C. Veatch. In December of 1862, General Grant assigned Veatch as the district commander of Memphis, placing him under Hurlbut's authority as the post commander at Memphis. Veatch possessed some ability as a leader and an administrator. Any effectual control of soldiers and the sex worker population in Memphis between 1863 and 1864 largely resulted from his actions. Even so, Veatch depended upon Hurlbut's orders.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Jeffrey Norman Lash, *A Politician Turned General: The Civil War Career of Stephen Augustus Hurlbut* (Kent State University Press, 2003), viii-ix, 117.

<sup>65</sup> Lash, *A Politician Turned General*, 110.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

With Veatch's help, Hurlbut initially made sporadic and largely ineffectual attempts at breaking up houses of prostitution in Memphis in late 1862 and early 1863. But Union military officials at every level tolerated, protected, and patronized brothels. In March of 1863, military authorities charged Captain Ormsby H. Huston of the 53<sup>rd</sup> Indiana with engaging in conduct unbecoming an officer. The surgeon from Huston's regiment testified that he "required medicine three times for clap; gonorrhoea has rendered him unfit for duty for two months." One of Huston's lieutenants testified that he had "three whores in one night, and is well known at many houses of ill fame, including the Iron Clad." In May of 1863, one of Hurlbut's subalterns, after "shutting up" a bagnio had "quartered himself in the house for two weeks, keeping a guard at the door, and living in cohabitation with his mistress, who was kept a close prisoner." Authorities also charged John F. Ritter, a colonel in the 1st Missouri Cavalry, with engaging in behavior unbecoming an officer. His lawyer argued that "if every officer of the army guilty of fornication was considered unworthy . . . few would escape censure."<sup>67</sup>

In response to incidents such as these, Hurlbut and Veatch issued what a *New York Times* reporter derided as a "fierce pronunciamiento" on the problem of widespread prostitution in the city. Special Order 13 required all prostitutes to leave town within twenty days or face banishment north of Cairo and the loss of all their furniture and clothing. The Order worked well initially. Within ten days, the military "broke up" twenty houses of prostitution and the women left town. On the day of the deadline, the correspondent for the St. Louis *Republican* reported that not more than twenty recalcitrant prostitutes remained in the city. "Our city became very quiet," the correspondent wrote, "midnight robberies and assassinations were suddenly brought

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<sup>67</sup> Thomas Lowry, *Sexual Misbehavior in the Civil War: A Compendium* (Xlibris, 2006), 69-73.

to a close.” It became so quiet “as to call forth the universal remark that Memphis was never as peaceable before.” Brigadier General Veatch received widespread approval from the city’s “virtuous” inhabitants for his decisive action in depopulating the dens of vice.<sup>68</sup>

Some Union troops believed the clampdown on prostitution necessary; not from the perspective of morality, but of order. George Cadman expressed relief to his wife when he remarked that “the annoyance caused by women, whiskey and dogs has almost ceased, at least I do not know that things are any worse here than in other cities of the same size.” George W. Gee, far from a moralist, wrote to his friend of the “innocent pleasures found and enjoyed in houses of ill-fame.” He, however, admitted the brothels of Memphis “were [almost] too public, and the order was needed . . . . I will not say a word against calling on [prostitutes], but I must have the privilege of taking an Enfield rifle with me.” Gee added that one morning a patrol found three Union soldiers with their throats cut; an incident he blamed on Confederate women who had turned to prostitution out of penury and a desire for revenge. Many soldiers may have believed prostitution harmless and even necessary. On such a widespread, open scale as existed in Memphis, however, it constituted a menace.<sup>69</sup>

The traditional attitude toward prostitution considered it necessary; it not only provided a sexual outlet for men, but when segregated and controlled, also protected the virtue of respectable women. But as George W. Gee suggests in his letters, the war transformed previously “virtuous” Southern women into sex workers. Many prostitutes undoubtedly came from the cities of the North, but sources suggest that a number of prostitutes in occupied Memphis hailed from

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<sup>68</sup> Lash, 132-133; St. Louis *Republican*, August 18, 1863.

<sup>69</sup> George Hovey Cadman Correspondence, August 27, 1863; George W. Gee to Clarence Caldwell, May 19, 1863, George W. Gee Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin. No other evidence of these alleged murders has been found.



nearby. Thomas Hannah, while out on one of his daily constitutionals, found hundreds of refugees, women and children, crammed into a cotton warehouse. Hannah described a scene of “horror and misery,” as women lingered beside the corpses of their children. Refugees such as these helped to swell the numbers of prostitutes in the city, while others hailed from Memphis itself. When refugee women from Mississippi turned to prostitution in Chelsea, the city's northern suburb, the *Argus* published their names to ensure they would be shunned by polite society. Even before the beginning of Union occupation, an increase in food prices led to a rash of thefts on the bluff, perpetrated primarily by children acting on the orders of their parents. A reporter for the *Appeal* complained of these thefts, “not only causing heavy loss to our merchants, but it is breeding up thieves and prostitutes in our midst.” Kate Seamon, a Memphis resident arrested under Special Order 13, testified that she had been “compelled to labor hard to support a helpless son, which is the only child I have.” Seamon pleaded with military authorities, testifying that if deprived of her citizenship in Memphis under Special Order 13, she “would be entirely destitute of means of support for myself and helpless child.” Seamon's plea for clemency fell on deaf ears and the Army sent her north of Cairo on a steamer.<sup>70</sup>

Sex workers rounded up under Special Order 13 received harsh treatment in the city's most notorious prison. The Irving Block, which stood opposite the northeast corner of Court Square, had previously been a Confederate hospital. Union authorities surrounded the building with a high whitewashed fence, built a guardhouse, and installed thick iron bars in its windows. The Irving Block became the repository of the city's prisoners of war, Union soldiers awaiting

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<sup>70</sup> Thomas Hannah to Elizabeth Hannah, January 31, 1863; *Appeal*, March 22, 1862; Thomas Lowry, *Confederate Heroines: 120 Southern Women Convicted by Union Military Justice* (Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 92-93; *Argus*, April 22, 1865.

court martial, and common criminals. Military police crammed more than three hundred men and women into the small space. A federal inspector described the prison as “the filthiest place ever occupied by human beings,” and found twenty-eight prisoners chained to a wet floor in a “dark, wet cellar” where they had been “constantly confined, many of them for several months, one since November 16, 1863, and are not for a moment released, even to relieve the calls of nature.” The prison was a dark, poorly ventilated, and chaotic place for inmates. How sex workers may have fared in this environment is impossible to know with certainty, but in addition to the unsanitary conditions they faced the possibility of rape at the hands of guards or other prisoners. At least one prostitute, Mary Raymond, committed suicide in the prison.<sup>71</sup>

A shooting in a whorehouse on Auction Street shattered the month-long calm following Special Order 13. A soldier visiting the house shot one of the inmates in the head during a heated argument, the bullet causing a flesh wound. This angered another soldier, who came to the aid of his companion. which degenerated into a free-for-all. Police arrested the whole house and dumped the contents of the brothel, which included a low barroom, into the bayou Gayoso behind the establishment. Within a matter of days, events in Mississippi fully erased what gains had been achieved by Special Order 13. Union victory at Vicksburg in July brought still more soldiers and yet another flood of sex workers into the city. A correspondent for the St. Louis *Republican* described the ways in which this new cadre of sex workers appropriated public space and passed themselves off as volunteers of the U.S. Sanitary Commission:

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<sup>71</sup> William Galbraith, ed., *A Lost Heroine of the Confederacy: The Diaries and Letters of Belle Edmondson* (University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 93; Jerry O. Potter, *The Sultana Tragedy* (Pelican, 1992), 28-30; Elizabeth Lyle Saxon, *A Southern Woman's War Time Reminiscences* (Memphis, 1905), 62-63; *Bulletin*, October 3, 1863.

The public hacks were kept busy taking females from one part of the city to another, and as most of them were strangers, inquiries were instituted to ascertain their names and vocation. Most of them claimed to be wives, sisters and cousins of officers in the army, and that they were directly or indirectly associated with the Sanitary Commissions and charity institutions of the city. So common were answers of that character from females who saw the city from hacks, that the name 'sanitary women' was quite generally applied to persons of the feminine gender seen riding in a public conveyance. Or when a lady was seen riding with a gilt buttoned gentleman on horseback she received a similar title. All of the old strong phrases relating to women who 'ply their vocations' at once became obsolete, and the new one ('sanitary lady'), was adopted instead.<sup>72</sup>

In a city such as Memphis, an unaccompanied woman could easily be a mother, sister or cousin visiting a sick relative or even a local woman out shopping. The surveillance of police and military authorities became necessary to ensure that prostitutes would not interact with respectable ladies in public hacks or enter into areas where soldiers bivouacked. Some prostitutes, such as Mollie Daniels, wore men's apparel to evade the detection of military authorities and slip into camp, an offense for which she received a twenty-five dollar fine. Women of the United States Sanitary Commission provided prostitutes with the perfect cover. These women came and went on a daily basis, from boarding houses where they roomed, to makeshift hospital wards. Women employed by the Sanitary Commission also frequently traveled alone. By consciously styling themselves as Sanitary Commission volunteers, sex workers further blurred the lines between virtuous women and public women.<sup>73</sup>

This blurred the distinction nurses and harlots in the minds of Union troops. Thomas Hannah wrote to his wife of the insults nurses endured from officers and enlisted men. Hannah described "a por [sic] miserable low life set that are talking and making all kinds of remarks

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<sup>72</sup> *Bulletin*, June 25, 1863; *St. Louis Republican*, August 18, 1863

<sup>73</sup> Memphis Recorder Docket, 1861-1862, July 26, 1862; Mary A. Livermore, *My Story of the War*, 290; For more on the women of the Sanitary Commission, see Judith Ann Giesberg, *Civil War Sisterhood: The U.S. Sanitary Commission and Women's Politics in Transition* (Northeastern University Press, 2000).

about them with regard to their characters [sic].” In at least one case, a nurse also worked as a prostitute. Mary Raymond, who came to Memphis as a nurse in the employ of a private “lady” turned to prostitution after allegedly being “seduced.” After turning to prostitution, the Army arrested Raymond and confined her to the Irving Block. Vowing she would never leave the Irving Block alive, Raymond ingested smuggled laudanum and died on October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1863. Mary Livermore, another nurse, described the ribald, debauched atmosphere of the Gayoso House, where she and other women with the Sanitary Commission lived and worked. “There were nightly drunken rows and fights in the house,” she wrote, “sometimes in rooms adjoining ours, when the crash of glass, the ribald song, the fearful profanity, and the drunken mirth, drove sleep from our pillows.” In a sexually charged, alcohol-fueled atmosphere, many nurses daily faced the prospect of harassment and rape.<sup>74</sup>

Public women continued to associate with “gilt buttoned” officers and once again crowded public spaces, necessitating another move by Veatch to suppress them. By this time, Hurlbut began to ignore the activities of prostitutes “for a consideration,” that is, a bribe. He permitted “favored officials” to run a “license-system” for brothels, which enabled some officers to protect their mistresses or favorite houses of prostitution while reaping a share of the profits. The occupiers, by adopting this system, embraced the practices of the civil authorities who preceded them. This remained the case so long as the number of prostitutes remained small. Hurlbut and Veatch no longer attempted to remove prostitutes entirely from the city, but to reduce the surplus population thronging the streets. Veatch and his subordinates regarded

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<sup>74</sup> Thomas Hannah to Elizabeth Hannah, July 16, 1863; *Bulletin*, October 3, 1863; Livermore, *My Story*, 290. For an incident of rape involving a soldier from the Tenth Minnesota Volunteers, see *Bulletin*, July 13, 1864 and Michael A. Eggleston, *The Tenth Minnesota Volunteers, 1862-1865* (McFarland & Company, 2012) 170.

“women of bad repute, good whisky, and Hiedsick's [sic] champagne necessary evils,” but they would not allow more of either than the “consumption of the city and the 16th army corps absolutely required.” Just how many prostitutes Veatch and Hurlbut considered sufficient for the needs of the city and the Army is unclear. At any rate, Veatch instructed the commanding officer of the provost guard, Captain Freeman, to arrest those prostitutes he deemed surplus and ship them north to St. Louis.<sup>75</sup>

On this occasion, however, the “sanitary women” behaved in a less cooperative manner. Captain Freeman and his men first raided a brothel located on Center Alley, a disreputable haunt between Main and Front and Washington and Exchange. This brothel stood in the entertainment and vice district of North Memphis, an area dotted with saloons, theaters, and brothels that stretched from Jefferson Street in the south to Auction Street in the north. Although Beale and Gayoso streets had their share of grogeries and houses of assignation, at this time they paled in comparison. A reporter described the target of the raid as a “third rate den” or “the headquarters of gentlemen in the army who do not wear shoulder straps.” Authorities targeted brothels not frequented by officers. Higher class houses of prostitution counted on the protection of officers, who paid bribes or ordered troops to steer clear of their favorite haunts.<sup>76</sup>

The women in this “third rate den” had been informed of Captain Freeman's orders, and prepared themselves. The women in the house -- fifteen in all -- set about consuming four dozen bottles of wine before the army could confiscate it. “The result of drinking the wine,” a reporter commented, “was fifteen girls in the most beastly state of intoxication imagineable [sic].” The inebriated women stood “ready and willing for anything except a peaceable acquiescence to the

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<sup>75</sup> Lash, *A Politician Turned General*, 132-133; *St. Louis Republican*, August 18, 1863.

<sup>76</sup> *St. Louis Republican*, August 18, 1863.

order of General Veatch.” Before the provost guards could storm the house, “a scene of demolition commenced, never witnessed in this city before.” The women, “mad with wine,” and angered over what they perceived as violations of their rights, “seized elegant furniture, chairs, tables, sofas, bureaus, mirrors, everything which they could handle, and broke them into a thousand pieces.” Sofas, chairs and mirrors littered the alley. Knowing their property would be lost to the Army anyway, the women set about wrecking it as an act of hopeless defiance. The provost guards visited several other houses on the same day, convincing a large number of prostitutes in the city to voluntarily leave on steamers for St. Louis. This latest effort, however, only temporarily closed several brothels.<sup>77</sup>

Hurlbut, meanwhile, continued to display a lax attitude toward the enforcement of prostitution regulations. In September of 1863, the provost guard received word of a rowdy “barn dance” thrown by a group of prostitutes on Main near Beale. The authorities arrested sixty “gay and festive 'cusses,” but released the sex workers. Sporadic arrests and deportations of sex workers continued throughout September and October of 1863. On October 3rd, Provost Guards “broke up” a “house of assignation” located at the corner of Beale and Second, aptly named the “Union House.” Authorities made twenty arrests, with the women being lodged in the Irving Block prison. The “Union House” reopened shortly thereafter, further underscoring Hurlbut's lax attitude toward enforcement. Hurlbut continued to follow a policy of unofficial licensing, only policing brothels and prostitutes when they became unruly.<sup>78</sup>

Much of Hurlbut's laxity came from the culture of the men who made up his staff, although most certainly from his own sporting proclivities. Carousing and revelry not only went

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Lash, *A Politician Turned General*, 245, n. 50.

on in the saloons and brothels, but the corridors of power as well. The Gayoso House, the headquarters of the 16<sup>th</sup> Army Corps in Memphis, nightly became the scene of drunken rows and “ribald song.” In letters to his wife, Thomas Hannah referred to officers as “shoulder strapped Gentry” calling them “the worst characters in the army for they are a privileged [sic] character and instead of good examples they often set the lowest and meanest.” Hannah may have referred to Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Binmore, Hurlbut's assistant adjutant general, who emerged as the chief offender in this drama. Throughout 1863, Binmore continued not only to frequent houses of prostitution, but also to associate publicly with courtesans. Other officers behaved as Binmore did, only they typically received punishment for openly violating rules of gentlemanly conduct. In one instance, James A. Price of the 7th Indiana Cavalry went out riding with a woman he claimed as his “wife.” The woman, riding sidesaddle in a ladylike manner, could have fooled observers. Price's strong state of intoxication proved a dead giveaway however, which tipped the provost guards to the woman's true identity. A tribunal dismissed Price from the Army for conduct unbecoming an officer.<sup>79</sup>

In all likelihood, Binmore escaped the attention of the authorities because of his post on Hurlbut's staff. But in the fall of 1863 he overstepped the bounds of acceptable behavior by admitting a woman he presented as his wife into polite company at the Gayoso House. Binmore, who had a fondness for idle talk and inventing stories about himself, must have relished passing a courtesan off as his bride. He lodged his “wife” at the Gayoso House where she “became the companion of respectable people,” including the wife of General Hurlbut. This lasted for a short time, until a lady acquainted with another of Binmore's wives detected her. When the matter

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<sup>79</sup> Thomas Hannah to Elizabeth Hannah, April 10, 1863; Lash, *A Politician Turned General*, 133; Lowry, *Sexual Misbehavior*, 71.

became public, one or more of the officers who lodged their spouses in the Gayoso House threatened to kill Binmore. The Army quickly brought Charges against Binmore and dismissed him from service. In a plea for mercy, Binmore explained he had married at the age of eighteen against his parents' wishes, failed to support his wife, sired children by her, and then abandoned them for another woman. He then adopted a life of restless wandering, moving from place to place in search of excitement. Unmoved by Binmore's excuse of youthful misdeeds returning to haunt him, Hurlbut refused Binmore's plea for clemency. Binmore's deception had been particularly egregious because it threatened the reputations of elite women. The indictment brought against Binmore stated specifically that “ladies of officers called upon” a woman of ill-fame and had admitted her to their society. Following his dismissal, Binmore returned to work as a journalist at the *Chicago Times*, where he attained moderate success. He does not, however, appear to have been held in high esteem by his colleagues.<sup>80</sup>

The removal of Binmore from his post as adjutant general proved a key turning point in the regulation of prostitution in Memphis. Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas H. Harris, a much more capable officer, now filled the post vacated by Binmore. Perhaps more significantly, Grant relieved Hurlbut of command at Memphis in April of 1864. Sherman and Grant blamed the defeat at Fort Pillow, in part, on Hurlbut's timidity. The editor of the *Bulletin* opined that Hurlbut “was permitted to remain too long for our good.” In Hurlbut's place, Grant appointed Cadwallader C. Washburn, a more capable administrator. Washburn suspended civil government in July of 1864 and appointed Lieutenant-Colonel Harris as mayor.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> St. Louis *Republican*, November 23, 1863, January 8, 1864; Lash, 245 n. 50; Sylvanus Cadwallader, *Three Years With Grant* (New York: Knopf, 1955), 128-131.

<sup>81</sup> Lash, 143-144; James, *Standard History of Memphis*, 134-135.



Harris began his tenure as mayor of Memphis by working to remove disreputable persons from public space. Court Square, which had long been frequented by prostitutes and respectable women alike, came to the attention of Harris as an area in desperate need of reform. In May, the *Bulletin* reported the square “had become a resort of disreputable women” and their carriage drivers, largely freedmen. A line of taxis parked on Main Street, opposite the square, offered their services to prostitutes. The park-like space became a veritable sexual buffet where prostitutes promenaded in the day and nighttime hours for the perusal of customers. “A lady is necessitated to suffer the insult of having a whip thrust in her face,” by “ungentlemanly” hackmen, a reporter for the *Bulletin* commented, and her “modesty shocked by the conversation going on between him and some lewd woman.” In late July the *Bulletin* reported Harris “determined to exclude all improper characters from Court Square so that citizens, their wives and families may enjoy its quiet shades.” Within a week, Harris cleared Court Square of litter and removed all “miscreants.” He also appointed a watchman with police powers to tend to the upkeep of the square and exclude persons of ill-repute. The new city government vocally declared its intent to force sex workers from public spaces.<sup>82</sup>

Meanwhile, a debate unfolded in Memphis over how to best regulate prostitution. “Scalawag” James B. Bingham, a Virginian who owned the Nashville *Union* and edited the Memphis *Bulletin* spurred this debate. A confidant of Andrew Johnson, Bingham regularly mailed copies of the *Bulletin* to Johnson in order to keep him apprised of the situation in the Bluff City. As a critic of the Hurlbut regime, Bingham criticized the unofficial policy of toleration pursued for years under military occupation: “It is true that our municipal officers now

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<sup>82</sup> *Bulletin*, May 13, July 31, August 6, 1864.

exercise some control over the unfortunates who have fallen to a life of shame, but this control is neither prescribed by law, nor uniform, nor of much practical service.” In fact, the system of unofficial licensing, like the smuggling of cotton in occupied Memphis, had enriched corrupt administrators.<sup>83</sup>

Through the *Bulletin* Bingham urged the adoption of a system of licensure, one which would provide medical care to check the spread of venereal disease but more importantly place prostitution “under surveillance” by authorities. Like efforts in pre-war Memphis to regulate prostitution, Bingham's plan also met resistance. A “clergyman” strongly dissented with Bingham in a letter to the editor, arguing a municipal government would “countenance and legalize crime” by licensing sex workers. “Should a revenue of our city be drawn from and increased by the promotion of vice?” he asked. Bingham responded to critics of licensure by asserting that nothing could be done to eradicate prostitution from Memphis: “Is our city interested in the repression of open, brazen vice?” he asked, “Are our army officers interested in the prevention of a vast amount of disease among soldiers? Then we should have some regulation of homes of ill-fame, and their unfortunate inmates.” The opinion of other Memphians regarding this course remains unknown. But unlike six years earlier, when Memphians had first publicly debated the regulation of prostitution, city officials no longer needed to respond to public opinion on the matter. Civil government had been suspended, and the military would pursue whatever course it deemed best.<sup>84</sup>

Memphians did not have to look far for an example of regulated prostitution. At the time,

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<sup>83</sup> James Alex Baggett, *The Scalawags: Southern Dissenters in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 102; *Bulletin*, July 28, 1864.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, July 30, August 3, 1864.

Nashville pursued such a policy for nearly a year. But Bingham made no reference to the system adopted by military authorities in Nashville in his paper. Instead, Bingham looked to the example set by Montreal, which he asserted, successfully regulated prostitution. Montreal, however, did not have a system of licensing and medical care for sex workers in 1864. The situation in Montreal did very closely resemble that of Memphis: rampant prostitution in public spaces and de facto official toleration supported by a sexual double standard. Bingham may have been mistaken, or he may have sought to offer an example of civilian regulation to Memphians, one which might remain in place after military occupation ended.<sup>85</sup>

Bingham may also have conflated Montreal, as part of the British Empire, with the then recently created Contagious Diseases Act. In the early 1860s, concerns in the British military over the effects of venereal disease led to the passage of the act, which allowed women to be seized in the streets and submitted to a compulsory medical exam. In 1865, Canada adopted the Contagious Diseases Act, applying it to every metropolitan area in the Province. But Bingham further demonstrated his ignorance of British regulations by asserting that “John Bull has never yet placed haunts of vice under proper police control.” Despite the ignorance of Bingham on this point, his reference to Montreal suggests influence from changes in the enforcement of deviance outside of the United States.<sup>86</sup>

Why should Bingham look to Montreal and the British Empire instead of Nashville?

Bingham did not consider the regulation of prostitution in Nashville successful or worthy of

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., June 28, August 3, 1864.

<sup>86</sup> *Bulletin*, August 3, 1864; Bingham may have viewed the Contagious Diseases Act favorably, but sought to present it in a manner that would not depict himself and the *Bulletin* as a pro-British publication. It is also possible Bingham may have considered the Contagious Diseases Act too lenient in its regulation of prostitution. For more on prostitution in Canada and the Contagious Diseases Act, see Richard A. Ball, “Changing Images of Deviance Nineteenth-Century Canadian Anti-Prostitution Movements,” *Deviant Behavior*, 33 (2012), 26–39 and Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*.

emulation. The regulation of prostitution in Nashville did not address the concerns of moralists or those seeking to restructure public space around middle-class women. The creators of the Nashville plan sought to prevent the spread of venereal disease among federal soldiers, not purify public morals. While decreasing cases of venereal disease among the soldiery, the Nashville regulations only made prostitutes more visible in public venues by granting them official sanction. John Watkins, a soldier stationed in Nashville wrote to his wife of the ubiquity of courtesans in the city after legalization: “It seems though there was nothing else here [but prostitutes]. For they monopolise everything. All the public hacks and drives the front seats of all places of amusement I have seen 6 & 8 in a carriage driving by drinking and carousing singing and hollering like so many drunken men. They are dressed up in the height of fashion all of the time . . . [and] U.S. officers are there principle [sic] maintainers.” Complaints of prostitutes “monopolising” public hacks became common in the city, and despite debating a policy for placing some controls on sex workers displaying themselves in public, Nashville authorities sat on their hands after licensing went into effect. Nashville authorities found the number of prostitutes in their city had increased from 352 in April of 1864, to over 500 in August.<sup>87</sup>

Bingham called for a system to protect daughters from “ruin” and help to purify the moral atmosphere of the city; a call that echoed the concerns of locals, not just those of the military authorities. The Nashville program, as it then operated, would not be acceptable in Memphis without changes. Bingham also appealed to the concerns of patriarchs and evangelicals, who while not embracing licensure, worried over the presence of prostitutes in public.

In addition, Bingham voiced the concerns of merchants anxious over the policing of

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<sup>87</sup> Stephen V. Ash, *When the Yankees Came: Conflict and Chaos in the Occupied South, 1861-1865* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 79; Cole, “Upon the Stage of Disorder,” 48, 52.

public behavior. Merchants made up half of the Board of Aldermen in July of 1864. Alderman J.E. Merriman, the owner of a jewelry and silver emporium on Main Street, supported progressive reforms to transform shopping areas into places safe for middle-class women. Merriman prided himself on the respectable image of his establishment, going so far as to construct a stone sidewalk for the benefit of female customers. In addition to Merriman, alderman and wood merchant Patrick Sherry also supported reforms to remove “fallen women” from public space. Four years earlier, Sherry, as part of the Grand Jury of Shelby County, recommended the creation of a “house of refuge” for “unfortunate females.” Sherry recommended the police confine prostitutes and put them to work, thereby “removing from the escutcheon of the city its foulest blot.”<sup>88</sup>

Bingham also appealed to an emerging medical discourse which linked sexual deviance to public health. An unusually large number of Memphis Aldermen in the summer of 1864 worked as doctors or druggists: B.F.C. Brooks, Gilbert D. Johnson, Andrew Renkert, and J. Bloomfield Wetherill, among them. Andrew Renkert, a German by birth, moved to Memphis in 1853, where he established a drug store on Main Street. Described as a “sterling citizen,” Renkert promoted the purification of civic life through the Sons of Temperance. His store, which catered to women through the retailing of perfume, also sold liquors solely for medical use. J. Bloomfield Wetherill came from a family of Pennsylvania pharmacists. In 1857 he graduated from the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy, an institution which exposed him to emerging ideas of sexual deviance, disease, and the need for quarantining sex workers. In 1860, Wetherill lived close to a house of prostitution kept by Puss Pettus in the fifth ward, an experience which may

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<sup>88</sup> *Appeal*, March 8, July 17, 1860; Professions of aldermen are taken from Rainey *1855-56 Memphis Directory* and Tanner, *1859 Memphis Directory*.

have convinced him of the need to place tighter controls on sex workers.<sup>89</sup>

Two Aldermen, Brooks and Johnson, associated with a reforming medical movement known as medical eclectics. Heavily influenced by progressive and evangelical reform movements then sweeping the country, Eclectics viewed themselves as the true purveyors of medicine in an age when “old school” physicians relied on purgatives such as calomel or caustic chemicals. Utopian Alexander Wilder, in “An Appeal to Medical Eclectics,” believed eclectic medicine would usher in “a social system in which drunkenness and prostitution will not be considered necessary elements.” Dr. Johnson, who sat on the board, hailed from a family of “eclectic” Connecticut physicians. Alderman Brooks also imbibed eclectic medical ideas through the Southern Reform Medical Association, of which he was a member. While certainly not utopians in their outlook, a reforming spirit prevailed among the city Aldermen. Most believed that prostitution should be regulated and public spaces purified of its influence. Days after Bingham's string of editorials, the Aldermen passed a resolution authorizing the mayor, in conjunction with the military, to enforce rules “to control and mitigate the evils of prostitution.”<sup>90</sup>

While Bingham ignored the Nashville program altogether, military authorities in Memphis evinced a greater curiosity as to its mode of operation. To that end, Mayor Harris dispatched Dr. Lorenzo Coxe, an agent with the United States Sanitary Commission, to Nashville with the instructions to observe the system in use there and report his findings. Coxe assumed his post as Medical Inspector of the Valley of the Mississippi for the U.S. Sanitary Commission in February. His duties involved inspecting Army campsites and hospitals to ensure troops kept

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<sup>89</sup> *Annual Reports of the City of Memphis for the Year Ending December 31, 1899*, 17; *The American Journal of Pharmacy*, Volume 59 (1887), 53; 1860 U.S. Census, Ward 5, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee, 23;

<sup>90</sup> *American Eclectic Medical Review*, Vol. 4 (1868-69), 2-3; *The Medical Eclectic*, Volume 1 (1874), 68; *The Eclectic Medical Journal*, Volume 16 (1857), 350; Smart, *Medical and Surgical History*, 895.

them sanitary and in an orderly manner. The Commission's conception of “sanitary” also embraced the maintenance of morality. Because so many soldiers brought bawdy books to camp, the Sanitary Commission's camp inspection returns included a field asking if books “mainly of a religious character” occupied the shelves of the regimental library. The inspection returns also featured a section that dealt specifically with intoxication. As an individual whose job embraced sanitation and morality, Lorenzo Coxe seemed the logical choice to dispatch to Nashville. Coxe's report on the Nashville regulations recommends terms which differed in important respects from the Nashville plan. It placed restrictions on the movement of prostitutes and ignored free women of color entirely.<sup>91</sup>

To understand why Coxe made these recommendations, we must look at his upbringing and training as a physician, as well as an examination of the regulation of prostitution in Philadelphia, where Coxe lived most of his life. A racialized medical discourse which held Africans to be naturally promiscuous formed part of Coxe's education. In addition, physicians widely accepted the notion that venereal disease proved endemic and intractable among people of color. Coxe's grandfather, John Redman Coxe, and his father, John Redman Coxe, Jr., promoted such views through professional journals. Furthermore, during the antebellum period, Philadelphia authorities concerned themselves with preventing interracial sexual contact between black prostitutes and white men. These racial discourses shaped Coxe's ideas about race, deviance, and disease, which in turn influenced his recommendations for Memphis. Rather than existing in a vacuum or being drawn directly from Nashville, the Memphis regulations reproduced racialized medical and legal discourses then common throughout the United States.

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.; U.S. Sanitary Commission Camp Inspection Return (Washington, D.C., 1861), 9-10.

Since the middle of the eighteenth century, medical opinion held venereal disease to be endemic among Africans, especially slaves. Physicians and planters alike promoted the notion of “natural promiscuity” as the root cause of the disease's widespread, intractable nature in Africans. Dr. Benjamin Rush, an instructor and close friend of John Redman Coxe, Sr., wrote of the “strong propensity to venereal gratifications,” which distinguished the “negro constitution.” Although in disagreement over the intensity of venereal disease among Africans, other prominent physicians and scientists such as Sir Hans Sloane and Dr. Thomas Dancer agreed venereal disease proved exceedingly common among them. Sloane and Dancer based their findings on the observation of slaves in the West Indies. Dancer, a frequent correspondent with Coxe's grandfather, John Redman Coxe, Sr., published his findings in a medical manual for plantation owners. The elder Coxe kept a copy of this plantation manual in his library.<sup>92</sup>

Dancer believed that syphilis existed in a latent form in most West Indian slaves, which they then passed to their children. Dancer found the worst symptoms of the disease did not begin to present themselves until later in life, which at times resulted in death, and at times he witnessed “whole families” of slaves “carried off [killed]” by the late onset of syphilis. According to Dancer, “the impossibility (without absolute confinement) of preventing them from irregularities,” or ensuring that they remain abstinent and clean, rendered hindering the spread of venereal disease among Africans very difficult. Dancer built his international and professional prestige in part on his study of enslaved people. Dancer became a contributor to Coxe's Philadelphia-based medical journal the *Philadelphia Medical Museum* in 1806 with an article on

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<sup>92</sup> *The Medical Repository*, Vol. IV (1808), 409; *Catalogue of the Extensive and Valuable Medical, Theological, and Miscellaneous Library of the Late John Redman Coxe, M.D.* (Philadelphia, 1864), 9; *The Philadelphia Medical Museum*, Vol. 2 (Philadelphia, 1806), 292-293, passim. It is likely that, as a son and grandson of a doctor, Coxe would have been familiar with this book in his grandfather's library.



the ectopic pregnancy of a “stout-made young Eboe Wench.” Articles that derived medical knowledge from the examination of enslaved bodies became common in both Coxe's publications and those of later homeopathic journals associated with Lorenzo Coxe's father. By the time Lorenzo Coxe entered medical school, the use of enslaved bodies as medical subjects became an accepted practice. Doctors such as James Marion Sims, considered a pioneer of gynecology, conducted surgeries on enslaved women in the 1850s.<sup>93</sup>

This medical view influenced the manner in which Philadelphia authorities, and authorities in other northern cities, enforced laws related to prostitution. Authorities in Philadelphia did not prosecute blacks disproportionately for drunkenness, fighting, or illicit sexual activities if they engaged in such disorder within their own neighborhoods and with those their own race. Medical and legal authorities alike believed Intra-racial prostitution a natural product of the heightened proclivity of African-Americans for what Benjamin Rush termed “venereal gratifications.” When black prostitutes crossed the color line, Philadelphia authorities grew concerned. Fears of miscegenation, as well as horror of contamination, influenced courts to take a hard line on black prostitutes caught with white clients. The case of mulatto sex worker Maria Gray, accused of theft by a white client, presents a graphic illustration. The alleged victim claimed Gray lured him into an alley for the purpose of robbing him. Gray claimed the man had agreed to pay her for sexual favors in the alley. The court believed her story, but imprisoned her anyway. No evidence existed to charge Gray with theft, but the court jailed her because “cases of connection of the most revolting description between blacks and whites are of late not

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 293; *Philadelphia Journal of Homoeopathy*, vol. 4, 548-554; Thomas Dancer, *The Medical Assistant* (1809), 212-213; Susan L. Smith, “Health,” in Charles Reagan Wilson, ed., *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 13: Gender* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

uncommon.”<sup>94</sup>

The medical view of African-Americans promoted by his professional and personal associates, as well as the legal practices of Philadelphia municipal authorities, influenced the recommendations Coxe made to General Washburn in late August. Washburn approved the proposed regulations and on September 30<sup>th</sup> they took effect. Military and civil officials established an office for the examination and registration of prostitutes at the corner of Union and Main and distributed a circular announcing the new law to the city's houses of ill-fame. For a fee of two dollars and fifty cents, prostitutes received a medical exam by Dr. A. Gregg. For an extra dollar, they could summon the doctor to their place of residence. Women found to be free of disease purchased a ticket of registry from the mayor's office for ten dollars. The money went to a “private female ward” in the city hospital, where diseased white sex workers received “all the privacy and comfort of home” and treatment by an “experienced matron” and female nurses.<sup>95</sup>

Did the program succeed? Did it reestablish order, limit the spread of disease, and improve prostitutes' lives? Historians have been largely positive in their assessments of the regulations. If, as some historians suggest, authorities primarily intended the regulations to reestablish order, it appears to have been successful. Thomas Lowry believes they accomplished this goal. Lowry cites the testimony of Mayor Channing Richards, who while uncomfortable with the program, believed it ameliorated the “worst consequences” of prostitution. Jeannine Cole also believes the regulations reestablished order in the city. Paradoxically, Cole claims the

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<sup>94</sup> Marcial Carlisle, “Disorderly City, Disorderly Women: Prostitution in Antebellum Philadelphia,” in Nancy F. Cott, ed., *History of Women in the United States, Vol. 9: Prostitution* (Munich: K.G. Saur Verlag GmbH & Co., 1993), 18.

<sup>95</sup> Smart, *Medical and Surgical History*, 894-895.

regulations restored public order, but outraged Memphians by thrusting prostitutes into the public sphere. She asserts Memphians wrote angry letters to the city papers to complain of sex workers' "incursions" into public space after licensing went into effect. Cole, however, only produces one example of public complaint, from 1863, before the military put regulations into place.<sup>96</sup>

The regulation of prostitution in Memphis does indeed appear to have succeeded in restoring public order. Between October of 1864 and June of 1865, prostitution-related incidents became much less common in the city papers. The local news column of the *Daily Bulletin*, which dealt largely with the exploits of sex workers, became unusually dull. When the local news reporter addressed the subject of the city's women, it reported that ladies of "secesh proclivities" wore "white and scarlet" to broadcast their resistance to occupation. At least on the surface, the program looks to have been a success. But whether this resulted from the regulations or the decrease in troops stationed in the city is unclear. White prostitutes may have been willing to surrender their claim to public space in exchange for the protection of city authorities.<sup>97</sup>

But hints of the old, more open sexual culture continued to persist. In February of 1865 police apprehended "four girls" and four "other persons" for "improper conduct" at a bridge crossing over the bayou near Chelsea. Streetwalkers now chose out-of-the-way areas such as bridges on the periphery of town for sexual liaisons with clients. But even in the center of town, women continued to face physical assault from men seeking sex. In March, two "drunken fellows" who claimed to be Union officers accosted Clarence Hall and three "respectable ladies" while walking along Front Street. One of the intoxicated men seized one of the women and "put his arm around her waist." Hall hurled the offenders into the street. The pair produced their

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<sup>96</sup> Lowry, *The Story the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell*, 86; Cole, "Upon the Stage of Disorder," 59, 65 n. 46.

<sup>97</sup> *Bulletin*, March 25, 1865.

pistols, but retreated without using violence. Some federal soldiers still behaved as though all women walking the streets were “public women.” Again in March, two “respectable looking,” but evidently confused men, wandered into a house and asked to see the prostitutes available. The proprietor of the house detained them, informing the pair that no prostitutes lived at the address. Casting about for an explanation for their actions, the men then claimed to be police officers there to conduct an investigation. Not believing their story, the homeowner summoned the police and had the unwanted houseguests taken to the “calaboose.”<sup>98</sup>

Even though something akin to order had been reestablished, federal troops continued to treat the women of Memphis, particularly the poor and refugees, like sex workers. Union authorities denied provisions to a “very decent looking woman,” a refugee who shared a room with her daughters, on the belief she and her daughters prostituted themselves for a living. Authorities generally assumed that displaced women with no means of support turned to exchanging sexual favors for money or food. Military men even encouraged young women to adopt sex work rather than given them government assistance. When a refugee girl of “sixteen or seventeen” asked a Union officer for rations, he responded that she “was old enough to prostitute herself for a living.” The licensing of prostitutes created a situation in which military authorities preferred to encourage destitute women to adopt prostitution rather than distribute rations. Given these facts, judging this program a success is somewhat problematic.<sup>99</sup>

Gauging the success of the regulations proves more difficult when turning our attention elsewhere, namely the success of the city in registering all sex workers and limiting the spread of venereal disease. Assessing the Memphis system proves more difficult than examining

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., February 24, March 2, 18, 1865.

<sup>99</sup> *Bulletin*, April 13, 1865.

Nashville's system of regulation, in part because of its shorter duration, and also because of the dearth of official records. Scarcely no records of the Memphis program exist except a brief report issued by Mayor Richards in February of 1865. But a cursory glance at those records reveals problems. The number of prostitutes the program licensed falls well short of pre-war figures regarding the size of the Memphis sex worker population, which stood closer to 160 women. Unless accounts from the occupation are exaggerations, they indicate a more visible, much larger sex worker population than had hitherto existed in the city. The program undoubtedly failed to register all of the city's white sex workers. Mayor Richards, remarking on this point, noted that "it is impossible to say how many have evaded the orders and eluded detection, but there is no reason to suppose that there is any considerable number."<sup>100</sup>

There are, however, a number of reasons to suppose that a considerable number of white women did evade detection. Women who engaged in prostitution on an informal basis, while continuing to pursue other forms of work, easily slipped beneath the radar of official detection. A considerable number of white working class women could not pay the twelve dollars and fifty cents necessary for a medical examination and a ticket of registry, which amounted to nearly half of what many working class women earned in a month.<sup>101</sup>

Furthermore, the Memphis regulations cannot be judged a success for the simple fact that city authorities did not register women of color. The Memphis program of regulation applied specifically to "white cyprians." Authorities did not require African American women to undergo medical inspections or carry tickets of registry. This did not result from the lack of black sex

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<sup>100</sup> Smart, *Medical and Surgical History*, 896; The number of sex workers prior to the Civil War is derived from the 1860 U.S. Census and the Memphis Recorder Docket, SCA.

<sup>101</sup> Smart, 895.

workers. The number of African American women engaged in prostitution had grown since 1860. In September of 1864 the *Bulletin* reported that out of 1,050 arrests in August, two-thirds came from drunkenness, fighting and prostitution, with prostitution prevailing “equally between whites and negroes.” Of the eleven houses of prostitution identified in the 1865 Memphis census, all but three housed black women. Sixteen free black women lived in Memphis brothels in 1865, up from five in 1860. Whether these women worked as prostitutes or as servants is impossible to determine since the census taker listed only the profession of the head of household. Beyond women of color who worked in predominantly white brothels there may have been a sizable number of black women who walked the streets.<sup>102</sup>

The presence of U.S. colored troops in Memphis, such as the 3<sup>rd</sup> Heavy Artillery stationed at Fort Pickering, created a market for black prostitutes. And arguably some white Union troops patronized black sex workers as well. A Union soldier stationed in Memphis wrote that black prostitutes in Memphis felt “loving towards us because they thought we were bringing them freedom and they would not charge us a cent.” In March of 1865, a reporter for the *Bulletin* noted that “arrests for cohabiting with blacks are pretty common, and might be a great deal more so.” In these cases, black witnesses could not testify against whites, typically resulting in acquittal. Other white Union troops, however, found the idea of engaging in sexual activity with black women repulsive. George Cadman described the cyprians of Memphis as “lantern jawed” and “the wrong color to suit my taste.” While an exact figure is impossible to determine, Memphis had a significant number of black prostitutes and interracial sex became increasingly open.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.; *Bulletin*, September 1, 1864; 1865 Memphis 1865 Census, SCA.

<sup>103</sup> Frederick H. Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion*, Volume 1, (Des Moines, 1908) 247; Lowry, *The*

The omission of black women from the effort to regulate prostitution in Memphis underscores the primary intent of the program: to protect respectable white women and purify public space. The popular conception of black women as hyper-libidinous informed the decision of the city's military government in setting this policy. Black women could not pretend to be respectable, nor could they, as a result of their color, masquerade as “ladies.” Hence, authorities excluded women of color from the law's requirements. Black women, excluded from any society with white women by virtue of their color, required no new limits to be set on their movements. The usual policing of interracial sex would continue.<sup>104</sup>

Another reason why authorities may have ignored freedwomen is found in the actions of General Cadwallader Washburn. As a Republican Congressman from Wisconsin, Washburn voiced Free Soil opinions on the status of blacks in white society, commenting that “the black man is out of place on the earth when in contact with the white man.” Like many other Republicans and Free Soilers, Washburn proposed keeping blacks out of the free territories. Of course, this hardly made Washburn unique, but actions in his capacity as a commanding officer suggest a discomfort with black women in close proximity to soldiers. During the Vicksburg campaign, Washburn complained of “a very large Negro Camp occupied mostly by women & children” near Hayne's Bluff. The camp stood near to where Washburn wished to encamp his division, and he worried about the temptation created by the presence of free women of color. “The presence of so many women must be very bad, can they not be removed to Milliken’s Bend

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*Story the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell*, 84; *Bulletin*, March 18, 1865; George Hovey Cadman to Esther Cooper Cadman, Memphis, October 3, 1863.

<sup>104</sup> Many cases involving black prostitutes fell within the sphere of the Freedmen's Bureau courts. Regulations which licensed black prostitutes would have created overlapping jurisdictional issues. In addition, the Bureau sought to put many freedmen back to work on farms. Licensing black women to engage in sex work would have interfered with this. See Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom* 38, 39.

or some other point,” he asked. Washburn ensured city laws would not grant sanction to black prostitutes while he commanded in Western Tennessee.<sup>105</sup>

Union military officials did not worry about the spread of venereal disease among black troops. A letter from Sergeant Franklin B. Chapman of the 1<sup>st</sup> Tennessee Light Artillery to Andrew Johnson in September of 1864, underscores this lack of concern. The Army brass stationed the 1<sup>st</sup> Tennessee at Fort Pickering in March, and by the end of September redeployed them to Nashville. In his letter, Sergeant Chapman wrote that he “knew of upwards of one hundred soldiers that has bin unfit for doty for monthes [sic]” on account of venereal diseases, many of which they contracted during their six months of deployment in Memphis. Chapman also complained of the failure of Army doctors in curing his comrades. Chapman related that “I had the worst case of venarial Diseases[.] I suffered allmost [sic] Death and I had the best Drs. in this city and still I was sinking fast.” The ministrations of Dr. John White, a free black man who practiced medicine in Nashville, cured Chapman and at least a dozen of his comrades. Chapman's letter suggests that not only had black men suffered high rates of venereal disease in Memphis, but U.S Army physicians failed to cure them. If they attempted at all. Recognizing black prostitutes had no “sanitary” certificates, black soldiers may have sought out white prostitutes for the sake of their health. The entrance of black men into a realm previously dominated by white men stoked racial tensions in the city. A witness reported black soldiers taunting Irishmen about their whorehouse visits in the months leading up to the 1866 riots.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Larry Gara, *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* (University of Kentucky Press, 1961), 63; John Y. Simon, ed., *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant: April 1-July 6, 1863* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1979), 318.

<sup>106</sup> Graf, *The Papers of Andrew Johnson: 1864-1865*, 189-190; *Report of the Select Committee on the Memphis Riots and Massacres*, 39th Congress, 1st Session, 1866, 127.



If the Memphis regulations did indeed fail to provide health care for black women, did the regulations improve working conditions for white sex workers? Both Lowry and Cole suggest these regulations did improve the lives of Memphis sex workers. The thirty-four women treated by the special women's ward of the City Hospital between September and February represent approximately one quarter of the women registered with the city. Clearly, some women benefitted from the program's medical care, even if it did mean confinement until certified by a doctor. Cole also believes the regulations “professionalized” prostitutes and contributed to a sense of group cohesion by bringing them together at a common location (the hospital ward or registration office) for non-competitive purposes. She characterizes the interactions of prostitutes prior to legalization as being dominated by largely professional jealousies and rivalries. This ignores the existence of other social functions among prostitutes such as dances, flash balls, picnics, and even funerals. While balls did indeed provide opportunities for women to attract clients, and hence acted as occasions where women competed with one another, competition and the development of social ties did not necessarily conflict. Furthermore, prostitutes formed their own business community by lending, renting, and buying from each other before and after licensure. The effect of legalization on the development of a sex worker “community” is difficult to assess. A stronger sense of “community” existed among sex workers in the years following the Civil War, particularly in the realm of business matters, but whether this emerged out of licensing is unknown. The shared experience of living in a hospital ward may have influenced how some white prostitutes viewed their common plight.<sup>107</sup>

Very few sources from prostitutes themselves shed light on whether or not they believed

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<sup>107</sup> Lowry, *The Story the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell*, 86; Cole, “Upon the Stage of Disorder,” 52-53;

licensing improved their lives. One source reveals that prostitutes, despite holding a license, could not count on city authorities for assistance, even when defrauded by customers. Madam Maggie Montgomery went before the recorder's court and claimed the city had to “prevent and punish imposition” on the keepers of brothels. Montgomery petitioned the city to extract payment from one T.B. Johnson, who “drank wine, shared her bed, and departed without paying.” The city recorder ruled he could not offer redress in the case. This indicates that prostitutes still remained a part of the shadow economy of Memphis; city authorities could license prostitutes and inspect them for venereal diseases, but did not recognize the legitimacy of their profession. If a hotelier or boarding house operator demanded payment from a delinquent customer, the city would have undoubtedly intervened. In this respect, the lives of prostitutes had not changed.<sup>108</sup>

The case of Mattie Sweet also suggests that the lives of white prostitutes had not changed for the better. In April of 1865, Sweet, who lived in Memphis for eighteen months, committed suicide. Apparently despondent over her unrequited love for a “young merchant,” Sweet ingested a large dose of morphine and died. Sweet's life fit the profile of many young women drawn to the sex trade. Rambling from Richmond to St. Louis to Memphis and leaving a failed marriage in her wake, Sweet turned to prostitution as her only means of support. The licensing program may have offered Sweet some measure of help, but the regulations did not address the underlying factors which pushed women into sex work and kept them there. The city paper reported “a few frail feminine friends were all that attended her remains yesterday to their last resting place in Elmwood cemetery.” Sweet's suicide reveals the personal lives of the city's prostitutes remained

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 59.

troubled, despite receiving some official recognition from the city.<sup>109</sup>

The exact date on which the licensing program ended remains unknown. The fragmentary nature of city newspapers during this period as well as the dearth of any official records make it difficult to determine exactly when or why Memphis officials saw fit to abandon them. The regulations most likely ended after July of 1865, when the military restored civil government to Memphis. In June, Memphians cast ballots for a new city government; this election replaced all but one of the city's provisional aldermen and returned John Park, the former Confederate mayor, to the mayor's chair. Why municipal authorities ended the system of legalized prostitution has been a matter of speculation. Jeannine Cole suggests the most apparent reason for ending the regulations would appear to be the reduction in troops bivouacked in Memphis following the end of military hostilities. With fewer potential customers, the number of prostitutes also dropped precipitously, rendering a program of licensure no longer necessary. However, a city such as Memphis supported over 160 prostitutes prior to the Civil War, a larger number than registered under the licensing program. Cole is correct in her rejection of this line of reasoning. Cole then conjectures that Aldermen abolished the system of licensing due to “community pressure” to stop “prostitutes' encroachments on the dominant public sphere.” This, however, is an unsupported assertion as no evidence exists that Memphians complained at all about the program between September 1864 and July of 1865.<sup>110</sup>

The only clue from any city authority as to why the program ended came from provisional Mayor Channing Richards, who described his connection to the program as “extremely unpleasant.” Richards attempted to distance himself and the city government from

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<sup>109</sup> *Bulletin*, April 13, 1865.

<sup>110</sup> A.R. James, *Standard History of Memphis*, 301; Cole, “Upon the Stage of Disorder,” 60-61.

the regulations by asserting that he and the municipal authorities had acted solely under the direction of the military. Richards further opined that municipal authorities possessed no desire to retain any connection to the regulations beyond that needed by the military. The mayor also suggested the military delegated this duty to the city because it possessed the resources to enforce it, thereby freeing military assets for combat and security. If the city government expressed discomfort with the program as Richards suggests, and acted only under orders from the military, then this indicates little will to enforce the program remained after the reinstatement of civil government.<sup>111</sup>

The end of municipal regulation of prostitution also resulted from the economic and professional interests of the new Aldermen. During military occupation, the provisional government not only placed restrictions on brothels but other resorts of vice, particularly saloons, which authorities required to pay exorbitant monthly fees to remain in operation. The military intended this policy to suppress the numerous small grogeries that operated throughout the city and in the process limit soldiers' access to intoxicating liquors. In the spring of 1865, an association of the city's saloon keepers organized for the purpose of reducing monthly licensing fees. By June 13, the association successfully petitioned for a reduction in the monthly fees from \$100 to fifty dollars. The centrality of saloons and liquor retailing to the local economy increased after war's end, so that by 1866 over 150 saloons operated in the city, not including restaurants and the many grogeries that operated out of small groceries. The effort to reduce licensing fees convinced several saloon proprietors to run for office in the municipal elections, resulting in the election of three saloon operators to the city council. Historically, saloon keepers exercised little

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<sup>111</sup> Smart, *Medical and Surgical History*, 896.

political power in the city, at least not from aldermen's seats. This change proved significant because saloon keepers supported prostitution and took an interest in ensuring sex workers might move freely throughout the city to lure men into saloons and purchase drinks.<sup>112</sup>

The economic interests of smaller, middling shopkeepers such as saloon operators and grocers tended to favor deregulation of prostitution. Saloon keepers profited from the business of prostitutes by providing them with accommodations for liaisons as well as by retailing liquor to streetwalkers. George Cadman recorded that on one of his evening strolls through the city he “looked at the girls in the saloons” and had a few ales. At least two of the city's saloons, and probably more, boarded prostitutes in the spring of 1865. Sex workers typically parked their carriages in front of saloons and had drinks brought to them while they solicited clients. Saloon operators opposed regulations which limited the movement of prostitutes and taxed their disposable income. In addition to saloon proprietors, four small grocers joined the city council as well. Grocers also retailed liquor through groggeries and tended to rent upper or back rooms to sex workers.<sup>113</sup>

Richard Tansey, who conducted research on prostitution cliques in New Orleans during the 1850s, found a similar pattern there. A coalition of small shopkeepers, coffee house or saloon proprietors, landlords, lawyers, and stable operators supported prostitution in the Crescent City. Against these a “progressive” alliance of merchants, doctors, ministers, shipping interests, “respectable” saloon and coffee house proprietors, and skilled artisans coalesced around reform and anti-prostitution measures. In Memphis, those who favored regulation of prostitution,

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<sup>112</sup> Bulletin, June 13, 1865; Number of saloons taken from Halpin, *1866 Memphis Directory*; James, 301.

<sup>113</sup> George Hovey Cadman to Esther Cadman, August 31, 1863; For an instance when saloon operators used their political clout to protect prostitutes, see *Public Ledger* July 14, 1877

whether through licensure or strict policing of public space, tended to fall into this latter category. The provisional government put into place in 1864 included many members of the “progressive” professions Tansey found in New Orleans: wholesale merchants, doctors, druggists, and skilled artisans. Many of these individuals hailed from the north and their livelihoods depended upon retail spaces purified of disreputable elements. The restoration of civilian government lifted a more representative city council into power, one that reflected the economic interests of a working class city heavily reliant on harlotry and drinking.<sup>114</sup>

Authorities ostensibly enacted regulation of prostitution to protect Union soldiers from venereal disease. The desire to remove prostitutes from public proved a stronger motivating factor for municipal authorities who sought to protect respectable white women and mercantile districts from disreputable elements. Confederate Memphis first addressed this problem by placing limits on mobility and enacting surveillance through a specially created police force. After the failure of this effort, Confederate military authorities turned to rigid policing of the streets through an embargo on sexual commerce. The latter effort met with more success, but quickly came to an end with the collapse of Confederate rule in June of 1862. The period of federal control marked a turning point in the size of the sex trade and considerably amplified the pre-existing problems of Confederate Memphis. Traditional methods of arrest and surveillance did little to restore order to the city. Much of the blame for the state of affairs in Memphis can be laid at the feet of corrupt Union officers who freely indulged their sexual appetites and enriched themselves by taking bribes from sex workers. This became particularly problematic after a sex worker infiltrated the polite society of Union officers' wives in the Gayoso Hotel. The restrictions

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<sup>114</sup> Richard Tansey, “Prostitution and Politics in Antebellum New Orleans,” in Nancy F. Cott, ed., *History of Women in the United States, Volume 9: Prostitution* (Munich: K.G. Saur Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, 1993), 45-75.

on mobility in the Memphis regulations, restrictions absent from the Nashville program, indicate authorities' primarily intended to remove "public women" from public and the society of respectable women. This is further supported by the absence of any attempts at regulating black sex workers in Memphis, despite their growing numbers during the war years. Any serious attempt at addressing the spread of venereal disease would have also licensed black women. Their exclusion emerged out of the law's intent: to guard white women. Since all black women naturally behaved like "harlots," a characteristic inscribed in their skin and bodies, regulation of their behavior proved unnecessary.

The "Progressive" council lifted into power in the provisional government of 1864 featured doctors, men who represented large mercantile firms, or those who worked as skilled artisans. They enacted regulation and licensure to protect their economic interests but also to remake the public life of the city in the bourgeois image they favored. The regulations did temporarily restore order to the city, but brought no fundamental changes to how the law and society viewed prostitutes. Black sex workers and their clients, unlicensed by this program, faced a greater threat of venereal disease. Meanwhile, prostitution continued to operate in the city, only at a less visible level. Union officers also encouraged refugee women to adopt prostitution. With officially sanctioned prostitution in place, the military no longer needed to hand out rations to refugee women; employment as a licensed prostitute provided them with a means of survival. Municipal authorities ultimately abandoned the regulation of prostitution, not out of a fear of prostitutes intruding into the public sphere, but because of the city's economic reliance on vice. The end of military government witnessed a reassertion of the city's ties to vice through the election of saloon proprietors and small grocers -- professions strongly tied to harlotry -- to the

Board of Aldermen.

By late summer of 1865, the enforcement of prostitution returned to its pre-war mode of operation. Madams and inmates alike appeared yet again in court dockets and in the city papers for “keeping” and being “inmates” of bawdy houses. The *Appeal* complained to its readers of the proliferation of a dozen newly-opened “Free and Easy” establishments in the city, where “vagrant youths” flocked to the spectacle of obscene dancing and ribald songs performed by “nigger minstrels.” “Waiter girls,” who offered drinks and something more in back rooms added to these attractions. “Progressive” merchants who worked hard to domesticate the city's public spaces continued their efforts as well. The war years set back these efforts considerably, and the first months of peace also seemed to bode ill for advocates of domestication and middle class respectability. Men like restaurateur Joseph Specht continued to offer a “safe” space for respectable women on the town. An advertisement for Specht's “Ladies Oyster Saloon” lamented the near monopoly of public space by places of rowdy masculine amusement. The advertisement complained of “rude, rough, undeserving bipeds of the male gender” carousing and enjoying themselves while the “better-half of creation” had no place where “they could stop and obtain the slightest refreshments.” Specht and other reforming merchants faced an uphill battle; the rowdy, masculine culture of “jolly fellows” and harlots would continue to dominate the streets of Memphis for many years to come.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> *Appeal*, Nov. 8, 1865, January 10, 1866,



### CHAPTER THREE: “WE AIN’T GOT ALWAYS TO LIVE, NO HOW:” THE LIVES (AND DEATHS) OF MEMPHIS PROSTITUTES

I was not long in discovering the reason of this astonishment and admiration, for, having begun to examine things a little carefully, I discovered without difficulty that I was in the house of a kept woman. Now, if there is one thing which women in society would like to see (and there were society women there), it is the home of those women whose carriages splash their own carriages by day, who, like them, side by side with them, have their boxes at the Opera and at the Italiens, and who parade in Paris the opulent insolence of their beauty, their diamonds, and their scandal.

This one was dead, so the most virtuous of women could enter even her bedroom. Death had purified the air of this abode of splendid foulness, and if more excuse were needed, they had the excuse that they had merely come to a sale, they knew not whose. They had read the placards, they wished to see what the placards had announced, and to make their choice beforehand. What could be more natural? Yet, all the same, in the midst of all these beautiful things, they could not help looking about for some traces of this courtesan's life, of which they had heard, no doubt, strange enough stories.<sup>1</sup>

On February 8<sup>th</sup>, 1876, crowds of Memphians gathered at 55 Madison Avenue -- the location of a magnificently appointed brothel -- to browse the personal effects of Susan Powell, a thirty-one-year-old madam who died two weeks previously of “congestive fever.” Memphians spoke of Powell in the same breath as Annie Cook, the queen of the Memphis demimonde. During her life she amassed a considerable estate from the proceeds of operating her bordello, living in ostentatious style and comfort. Auctioneer A.M. Stoddard billed the estate sale as the “most magnificent and attractive sale that has ever been offered in this city,” which featured “elegant” parlor furniture, “fine paintings,” a 7 ½ octave piano, “fine chandeliers,” and diamond and gold jewelry. “Ladies,” Stoddard added, “are specially invited.” Two days later the *Public*

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<sup>1</sup> Alexandre Dumas, Edmund Gosse, ed. *The Lady of the Camellias* (London: William Heinemann, 1905), 2-3.

*Ledger* reported disapprovingly that “numbers of men, respectable ladies and members of the demimonde visited the establishment – some to make purchases, others to satisfy curiosity.” The reporter drew specific parallels with the writings of Alexandre Dumas and “that not too moral drama” *Camille*. Comparing the visitors to tourists at Herculaneum and Pompeii, who came to discover “traces of the lava-drowned inhabitants,” the reporter complained of public curiosity regarding the lives of public women and their “gilded saloons of vice.”<sup>2</sup>

While titillation and morbid curiosity brought the public to the estate sale at 55 Madison, gravediggers quietly interred Powell's remains in an unmarked grave at Elmwood Cemetery. The area of Elmwood where they interred Powell initially served as a resting place for Federal soldiers, and later received thousands of Yellow Fever victims. Memphians called this plot of land “No Man’s Land.” No respectable person would deign to be buried there.<sup>3</sup>

The complaints of the reporter for the *Public Ledger* ring rather hollow, however, considering the Memphis papers played a large role in popularizing the deeds of Memphis prostitutes like Susan Powell. Memphians hungered for gossip regarding public women, a hunger which newspapers encouraged and fed. The doings of madams and their boarders increasingly came to occupy a prominent place in the social life of the city. References to arrests, riots, and murders no longer dominated coverage of prostitutes in the local news columns. Tales of the demimonde filled the city papers, tales at once cautionary and celebratory. Reporters notified their readers of the marriage of a well-known madam, published interviews with streetwalkers, and printed letters and poems written by prostitutes. Editors calculated much of this to generate sympathy for “fallen women,” an increasingly common conception of prostitutes as victims of male lust. In the 1870s, editors began to present prostitutes in a more humane way but never

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<sup>2</sup> *Public Ledger*, February 10, 1876.

<sup>3</sup> Elmwood Cemetery Daily Burial Record, January 22, 1876, SCA.

abandoned language which condemned them as nuisances incapable of reform.<sup>4</sup>

The language of the “fallen woman” and the “Magdalene” concealed more than it revealed. The attempt to humanize the prostitute served only to construct another idealized image that failed to capture the reality of her daily life. Just who were these women who sold their bodies and sparked the public imagination? How did they become prostitutes? Were they simply “outcasts” from society, who, ruined by male lust and with no other options, found themselves trapped in a world of exploitation? Or did they choose their way of life? How did prostitutes interact with each other and their customers? Did prostitutes live romantic lives amid the gaudy paraphernalia of vice? This chapter seeks to answer the question of how Memphis prostitutes lived -- and died. But like visitors to Susan Powell's estate sale, we can look only at the remnants of their lives. Precious few voices of sex workers remain to tell us of how they lived and felt about their place in the world.

This dearth of voices has not always been the case in every locality and place. In some localities, particularly in the Northeast, historians possess a wealth of source material on the lives of prostitutes in their own words. Journalists, authors, and social reformers, however, filter these stories through their own lenses. In his monumental study of prostitution in New York, William Sanger distributed questionnaires to two thousand sex workers and asked them, “what was the cause of your becoming a prostitute?” The responses provide a glimpse into the social ills plaguing the rapidly urbanizing northeastern United States in the middle of the nineteenth century. Over one quarter of respondents claimed to have entered prostitution because of “destitution.” Thirteen percent claimed to have been seduced and abandoned by husbands or

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Meil Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 70-76, 109; “Fallen Woman Trope” in Melissa Hope Ditmore, ed., *Encyclopedia of Prostitution*, Volume 1 (Greenwood Press, 2006).

lovers, while another eight percent claimed they had adopted prostitution because of “ill treatment by parents, husbands or relatives.” Perhaps most distressing to reformers, another quarter claimed they became prostitutes out of “inclination,” or attraction to the lifestyle of the courtesan. While no such survey of Memphis prostitutes exists, an examination of newspaper and court records reveals similar circumstances, but with some important differences.<sup>5</sup>

The Civil War profoundly shaped the development of the sex trade in Memphis. Orphaned children and dislocated, destitute women congregated in the city during and following the war's aftermath. These women and girls turned to prostitution to survive or offered easy prey for unscrupulous procurers. Child prostitution became increasingly common after the Civil War. To address child prostitution, Memphis reformers established a home for wayward girls and “fallen women.” In the 1890s, elite Memphis women spearheaded a successful campaign to increase the age of consent in Tennessee from ten to eighteen. The war also brought scores of African American women into the city who also turned to prostitution out of destitution. The Civil War changed conditions drastically, not only in terms of demographics, but also in terms of the culture of the city, which became more tolerant of sex work and bawdy entertainments. Just as reforming Memphis elites embarked on their most ambitious programs to redeem Memphis from vice, a rising class of politically powerful petty bourgeois shopkeepers, saloon operators, and other lower middling sorts who allied with sex workers promoted a bawdy change in the city's culture.

Class and race proved decisive factors in determining whether a woman would enter into the sex trade in Memphis, and what response this would receive from the community. Women from poor and working-class backgrounds made up the majority of sex workers in the city. The

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<sup>5</sup> William Sanger, *The History of Prostitution*, 488.

frequency of illiteracy among brothel prostitutes indicates that these women came from impoverished circumstances with little or no education. Possessing few or no skills beyond sewing or domestic work, they turned to selling their bodies. At the bottom of the economic ladder, women of color entered into sex work out of necessity, but like many white prostitutes, also out of an affinity for the fast life. Black women made up roughly ten percent of the brothel and crib prostitutes in the city in the decade following the Civil War. The numbers of black streetwalkers are difficult to determine, but they probably accounted for a much larger percentage. White Memphians generally did not view black prostitutes as victims of male lust, but rather naturally disposed to a life of loose-living. Of the dozens of gushing, sentimental tales of wayward women printed in the Memphis papers, not one concerns a black woman ruined or decoyed from her home. The Women's Christian Association Mission Home, a reform organization led by elite white women, never admitted women of color, but treated black prostitutes purely as a criminal element.<sup>6</sup>

The average prostitute remained poor, sickly, and mired in violence and drug addiction. A prostitute stood a very good chance of dying young. Estate sales such as those of Madam Powell became all too common. Memphis prostitutes lived short lives, often dying by their own hand. Of the thirty-one prostitutes known to have died in Memphis between 1860 and 1890, sixteen committed suicide, eight died of disease or malnutrition, four were murdered, two died accidental deaths related to occupational hazards, and one expired from “dissipation.” The level of suicide is perhaps the most telling statistic. Even among the ostensibly successful members of the demimonde, numerous suicide attempts reveal the dark reality behind the glittering parlors and expensive dresses.

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<sup>6</sup> The figure of ten percent is derived from census records from the 1860, 1870, 1880, and 1900 U.S. Census, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee and the Memphis Census, 1865, SCA.

There are, however, glimpses of scarlet women who enjoyed their work and lifestyle. While newspapers and reformers amplified the misery of sex work, a number of independent women established social bonds with their fellow sex workers, reaped remunerative rewards, and lived lives of relative comfort and ease. Most women did not enter prostitution with the intention of remaining permanently. Contrary to the idea reformers promoted, adopting sex work did not inevitably lead to disease, destitution, and death. Many managed to move out of prostitution through various means, either by marrying, finding another occupation, or seeking help in a Magdalene asylum. A few rejected attempts at reform, escaping from reformatories, and continuing on their former path.

This chapter, divided into five sections, addresses the lives of prostitutes and their relationship to the wider Memphis society. This embraces the private lives of sex workers, but also their relationships with each other, reformers, and everyday Memphians. Its primary focus is on the period between the Civil War and the end of the nineteenth century. The first section addresses the changes that occurred in the culture of Memphis with regard to open discussion of prostitution and ribald subject matter in the press, courts, and streets. A view of prostitutes as victims promoted by reformers and newspaper editors paralleled the development of this bawdy culture. Section two focuses on the topic of child prostitution and rising fears of seduction and abduction of minors. Racial and class markers proved decisive factors in just which minors faced exploitation and whether Memphians viewed them sympathetically. The third section relates Reformers' attempts at driving prostitution from the city and sex workers' reactions to this effort. Reformers' belief in the victimhood of all prostitutes, as well as excluding women of color, hamstrung their efforts to effectively address prostitution. Sections four and five address prostitutes' relationships and health, respectively. Sex workers formed friendships and socialized

with one another, but professional jealousies and violence constantly intruded on their lives. Relationships with men remained similarly troubled. Prostitutes faced great health risks, not only limited to violence and venereal disease, but also from Yellow Fever due to the location of brothels near stagnant bodies of water. Finally, this chapter evaluates prostitutes as mothers, finding that while characterized as dysfunctional parents by the wider society, prostitutes made the best of those resources available to them.

Following the Civil War, Memphis papers took a greater interest in the activities of sex workers. Editors satisfied the demands of readers for knowledge of what transpired in houses of pleasure. This fit with the culture of the city, which by 1870 developed an open sexual culture based around bawdy entertainments. Aline LaFavre, Ida Cerito, and their troupes of can-can dancers kicked and pirouetted at uptown saloons and variety theaters, provoking the ire of moral reformers. “Immense audiences,” flocked to see what one *Appeal* reporter derisively referred to as “the lascivious movements of that Americanized French bestiality.” Promoters often made explicit links between the can-can and prostitution. In 1871, a dance troupe exhibited the can-can at Broom's Opera House, complete with a “demi-monde queen” named “Frailty” portrayed by danseuse Mollie Melville. Attempts to close these exhibitions proved unsuccessful: an injunction from Judge Hunter prevented the police from shutting down the performance of the dance at Thompson's saloon in 1869. Meanwhile, the Memphis Industrial Exposition Building, when not employed as a skating rink and concert hall for respectable customers, served as a dancehall frequented by prostitutes and their admirers. Masked prostitutes and their admirers exclusively attended New Year's Eve balls at the Exposition Building.<sup>7</sup>

Despite decrying these indecent entertainments, the city papers promoted them. When

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<sup>7</sup> *Appeal*, May 12, 28, 29, 1869, January 2, 1878; *Public Ledger*, October 31, 1871.

madam Pauline Livingstone gave a dance party, the *Ledger* reproduced the “illuminated embossed” invitations soliciting the attendance of elite men. Accounts of parties in brothels and the performances of danseuses and can-can troupes filled the local news columns. One reporter described an overflowing audience of “old age and youth, steady old bald headed veterans and fast young men, married men and single” gathered at Greenlaw Opera House to witness the can-can. “A published list of those attending,” the reporter continued, “would startle the feminine world into fits of virtuous indignation.” Memphis grew into a fast city that hungered for racy entertainments, one which the papers simultaneously fed and decried. The development of a fast culture that tolerated prostitution and bawdy performances fits with national trends during the 1870s, when municipalities increasingly tolerated prostitution. Barbara Meil Hobson found that authorities rarely prevented prostitutes from practicing their trade during this period, in part because many municipalities developed informal systems of regulation.<sup>8</sup>

While this transformation in public mores took place, editors and reporters changed the manner in which they depicted prostitutes. A survey of hundreds of newspaper stories from two of the city's major journals, the *Appeal* and the *Public Ledger* yielded 122 instances in which the papers took an editorial stance on sex workers. These are differentiated from stories which simply presented factual material regarding the arrests of prostitutes. Prior to the Civil War, papers presented largely negative depictions of sex workers, but by 1870 this began to change. Between 1858 and 1869, nineteen descriptions of prostitutes in negative terms outnumbered six instances of portrayals of prostitutes as victims. Between 1870 and 1880, stories or editorial comments which emphasized victimhood (twenty-nine) slightly outnumbered those which portrayed sex workers as depraved or evil (twenty-three). These numbers remained relatively

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<sup>8</sup> *Ledger*, March 3, 1875, December 28, 1880; Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*, 46-47.



close throughout the 1880s. Six instances between the middle of the 1870s and the early 1880s offered more humane, even positive stories and editorial comments on the good deeds of the city's prostitutes. This change, however, had a racial component. Papers never depicted black sex workers as victims.<sup>9</sup>

This humanizing trend can be seen in a poem submitted in 1872 by an unnamed woman described as “one of the most flattered of all the fair daughters of this city,” entitled “Life-Frost:”

A wretch – a wreck – an objectless curse!  
While pain and grief still growing the worse  
Hopeless I gasp, for hope in the strife,  
Heedless the world of the hell of my life.  
Homeless, friendless, astray on the earth,  
    Aimless, soulless, afloat on the tide;  
Away from kindred, the trace of my birth,  
With nothing to love me – with no one to chide.

The content of the poem fit well with the notion of prostitutes as victims of male lust and painted a dark portrait of a sex worker's life as one of weary exile. The editor hoped the poem would promote purity.<sup>10</sup>

The 1870s also marked the emergence of anti-prostitution reform activities in Memphis. Middle-class women and their husbands promoted the changing view of sex workers in the city papers through print culture and the churches. In 1872 Memphian Lide Meriwether published *Soundings*, a deeply sentimental, dramatized depiction of the lives of “fallen women” which humanized prostitutes and attacked the sexual double standard. Meriwether even brought sex

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<sup>9</sup> These figures are taken from newspaper articles in *The Daily Appeal* and *The Public Ledger* between 1857 and 1890.

<sup>10</sup> *Appeal*, November 17, 1872. This poem provoked a response; a month after its publication three poems written by a woman giving only the name “Barbara” appeared in the *Appeal*. These poems presented a Christian message of personal redemption. The editor used the opportunity to advocate for greater kindness on the part of his female readers, whom he judged to be less forgiving of “fallen women” than his male readership. See *Appeal*, December 19, 1872.

workers into her own home to redeem them from a life of vice. Three years later the Sisters of the Good Shepherd and the Women's Christian Association each established institutions for the reform of sex workers.<sup>11</sup>

But not everyone embraced the notion of the “unfortunate magdelene.” Newspaper articles and trial testimony attest to the persistence of bawdy humor and what Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz calls “vernacular sexuality.” Memphians still viewed prostitutes and illicit sex as humorous subjects. Courtrooms frequently burst into laughter when lawyers questioned prostitutes on the witness stand about their business. When Josie Lee took the stand in the murder trial of Captain Cannon, the prosecuting attorney asked how many “friends” she had. This prompted the attorney for the defense to object, to which the prosecutor replied, “I don't propose to make her tell names.” The remark elicited a hearty round of laughter from the courtroom. On another occasion, Lou Smith testified in the murder trial of Van Roberts. Counsel asked Smith to identify a man named Darby while on the stand; when Darby stepped forth to be identified, Smith cracked a “broad smile” and replied, “Yes, I have seen that gentleman before.” The prosecutor replied, “He never made a deep impression on your young affections?” Smith, fanning herself with a small fan, replied, “No, sir, he did n-o-t.” Again in this instance the court burst into a peal of laughter, presumably at the implication that Darby's “impression” on Smith had been lacking in a certain physical “depth.” The situation became so bad that local feminists and women who supported them sat in courtrooms to dissuade visibly intoxicated lawyers from berating and impugning the virtue of seduced young women. In 1886, Lide Meriwether and Elizabeth Saxon sat on either side of Judge Greer to prevent counsel from bring up certain “vulgar” matters in the high profile murder trial of a young woman. Bawdy courtroom testimony

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<sup>11</sup> Lide Meriwether, *Soundings* (Memphis: Boyle & Chapman, 1872).

frequently appeared in the papers.<sup>12</sup>

Other stories and items in the local press presented the life of the demimonde as one of fun, frolic, and humor. The *Appeal* and the *Ledger* poked fun at a man named W.B. Hardwick who married a prostitute while under the influence of whiskey. Despite expressing a mutual intention to annul the marriage after sobering up, the couple went on a honeymoon to New Orleans anyway. A report on the activities of a demimonde ball in 1878 noted a “playful effort” on the part of many sex workers performing the can-can, “to attempt to kick the hat off of some male acquaintance or stranger who happened to come within range of their nether limbs.”<sup>13</sup>

Jokes and parodies also became a common fixture of the papers. A short piece in the *Appeal* about a conversation between a married man in the pit and a prostitute in the balcony of a theater poked fun at those who attended plays for picking up prostitutes. “Why is a henpecked husband like an opera hat?” the woman asked the man, “Because he's very big when he's out, but immediately shuts up when he gets home.” The man replied, “We are told that nothing is made in vain; but how about a pretty young girl? Isn't she maid-en vain?” Businesses parodied and poked fun at the language reformers used to describe fallen women in their advertisements. An advertisement entitled “Fair but Frail” placed by the Eagle Stove Store, began with the fictitious story of “another poor unfortunate,” who lived in exile from the rest of mankind “until some kind of friend leads them to the Eagle stove store, No. 36 Main Street, where they select an Alligator of Imperial cook-stove, and are made happy.” Memphis possessed a divided mind. Reform ideology slowly made its way into the papers, but bawdy humor persisted. The city became a battlefield of competing conceptions of sexuality.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Appeal*, July 15, August 27, 1871.

<sup>13</sup> *Ledger*, April 18, 1878; *Appeal*, April 18, January 2, 1878. W.B. Hardwick allegedly tricked Napoleon Hill, the merchant prince of Memphis, into putting up bond for his marriage to Josephine Speer (alias Edwards).

<sup>14</sup> *Appeal*, August 27, 1871, January 2, 1878, July 15, 1871, November 7, 1879, October 5, 1873.

While the image of prostitutes changed, that of madams remained largely the same. Only three stories depicted madams as figures worthy of praise, and two of those women died from Yellow Fever. Madams remained overwhelmingly the object of abuse by reporters and editors alike. The dominant view of madams remained that of confirmed, hardened women of ill-fame who exploited prostitutes and ruined innocent girls. The press never depicted black madams, like common black sex workers, as either victims or individuals capable of reform.<sup>15</sup>

Editors and reformers created an idealized image of common white prostitutes as suffering outcasts that did not capture the reality of the sex worker's life. A woman's "fall" did not always result from male lust; women often adopted prostitution by choice as a means of survival. While continuing to foster the victim image, the city's papers reported on sex workers as though their purity or impurity relied on their class or racial origin. Reformers considered every white prostitute a victim, but some deserved pity and help more than others, particularly if they came from a good home and had received a proper upbringing. Moreover, an emphasis on the image of the "fallen woman" did not require editors or readers to reflect on the economic conditions which made prostitution a necessity for some, including the very young. The notion of "fallen women" obfuscated the origins of the prostitute and prevented any serious challenge to the structural factors which drove women and girls into prostitution.

### **Destitution, Abduction, and Inclination to a life of vice: The Prostitution of Minors**

On a rainy night in March of 1880, Mary Jones, Clara Bell, and Lee Turner sought shelter under an awning at the corner of Main and Gayoso. Jones, a "light mulatto" and the eldest at

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<sup>15</sup> See note 8 above.

thirteen, worked as a domestic servant in the Seventh Ward. Bell and Turner were twelve and ten-years old respectively. Three unattended adolescent girls on Main Street would have struck few observers as out of the ordinary. Working-class children often worked there peddling or went to and fro from work, milling about and playing. But prostitutes frequented this intersection, and “respectable” girls gathered here at their own risk, especially late at night. John Phillips, a burly, mustachioed, club-footed Irishman approached the trio and propositioned them. He wanted the girls to join him in his room. Jones, who traded sexual favors for money in the past, replied, “We all three knows all about it.” Clara Bell allegedly responded, “Yes, let us go up and make some money.” Phillips promised the girls a dollar.<sup>16</sup>

Phillips brought the girls to his room above 208 Second Street where he made them remove their clothes and lie down with him on a quilt on the floor. Phillips then had sexual intercourse with the three of them. Lee Turner, ignorant of his intentions, begged Phillips to stop. Phillips paid Jones ten cents and gave Bell and Turner five cents each. As they left, Lee Turner complained of being in debilitating pain that made it difficult for her to walk.<sup>17</sup>

Within a short time, Turner began exhibiting signs of venereal disease. Her mother went to the police and had Phillips arrested on a charge of criminal intercourse with a minor. When questioned, Phillips first claimed he had been drunk and only had sex with Jones and Bell, the two black girls. He later changed his story, however, and claimed he sent the girls away when *they* propositioned him. Race shaped the manner in which the press and court treated the girls – Turner as a victim and Jones and Bell as disreputable. Because of their race, the court did not consider Mary Jones and Clara Bell victims. Instead, a judge ordered them imprisoned to await Phillips's trial. From testimony, it is likely Mary Jones worked as a prostitute and as a procurer of

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<sup>16</sup> *Appeal*, March 24, 1880. The age of consent in Tennessee at this time was ten years.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

other girls for sexual encounters with men. During questioning, she testified she had visited Phillips's room on another occasion with two other girls. The *Appeal*, in its coverage of the testimony, depicted Jones as depraved: “The girl gave the details of the horrible crime in filthy language, and seemed much amused while so reciting them.”<sup>18</sup>

For Turner, class origin proved just as important as her race. Judge Logwood questioned Turner, probing to determine if she already worked as a prostitute: “Have you ever had anything to do with a man before? Carried a dollar to your mother? Have you ever been in another man's room?” Despite ample evidence of her purity, authorities took Turner from her mother, who worked at sewing in a tailor's shop, and placed her in the Home for Fallen Women. “It is hoped,” a reporter remarked, “they [the Women's Christian Association] will be able to rescue her from the bad associations into which she was drifting.” Although deemed a victim by the press and court, authorities believed Turner needed to be corrected by middle-class reformers lest she become a disreputable girl. The press depicted Lee's mother as wholly unfit to care for her daughter, having “very little control over her” and abandoning her “to the loose company of the streets.”<sup>19</sup>

The story of Mary Jones, Clara Bell, and Lee Turner touches on a central topic this section will address. Specifically, how did women become prostitutes? A significant minority of Memphis sex workers entered prostitution at a young age, at times against their will, but often out of necessity. The sexual abuse of working-class children became a fixture of the sex trade in Memphis. Most child prostitutes also appear to have been black, an indication of the miserable poverty people of color faced in the nineteenth century. Accounts of the abduction of young white girls for the purpose of prostitution filled the papers during the 1870s and 1880s. The press

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<sup>18</sup> *Appeal*, March 24, 1880; *Public Ledger*, March 23, 1880.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

emphasized these stories because they contributed to the emerging popular view of prostitutes as victims. This supported the belief that prostitution constituted “white slavery.” This notion propped up another middle-class belief: the natural purity of white women. While these stories of abduction do not indicate the existence of widespread sexual slavery, the sheer number of these accounts is difficult to ignore, and indicate a sizable demand for sex with minors.

But not all who became “nymphs du pave” entered prostitution because they had been seduced or abducted as children. Many entered prostitution for the promise of higher wages, autonomy from parents, escape from crowded homes, and the drudgery of labor. Some Memphis prostitutes reported being attracted to prostitution and struggled to remain in the trade. A prostitute could live the fast life of nineteenth century youth culture, of urban amusements and consumerism. By failing to grasp that sex work held certain attractions for young women, reformers fatally hamstrung their efforts to stamp it out.

In August of 1871 “a woman and a little girl of about twelve were taken to the station house.” The police charged the woman with keeping a house of ill fame, “and the younger with being an inmate,” at the “notorious” bagnio, No. 206 Front Street. The woman put up bail and walked free, but the child, “whom she was instrumental in ruining, perhaps, was locked up.” The matter of fact manner in which the *Appeal* related this story may seem shocking to modern sensibilities, but underage prostitutes walked the streets of nineteenth century Memphis and many other urban centers throughout the United States and Europe. Journalist William Thomas Stead created a sensation in 1885 when he infiltrated the brothels of London and purchased the sexual services of a thirteen-year old girl named Eliza for £5. The case led to changes in the consent laws of the United Kingdom and ultimately to greater attention to the threat of “white slavery.” Similarly, child prostitution, both formal and informal became a common sight in the

streets of New York throughout the nineteenth century. Judith Schafer has found numerous instances of child prostitution in New Orleans as well.<sup>20</sup>

Following the Civil War, child prostitution became part and parcel of the life of the tenements, streets and saloons of Memphis. Prior to the Civil War the practice appears to have existed only on a small scale. between 1850 and 1860 only one minor prostitute has been identified, fifteen-year-old Sophia Hill, a Tennessee native who lived in a high class brothel kept by Margaret Mitchell. With the relative wealth of the madam, the amount of personal property held by four of the nine prostitutes in the house, as well as the presence of a servant, it is possible Sophia Hill lived a better life than most homeless orphans. A fifteen-year-old prostitute would not have struck most observers as particularly out of the ordinary; an examination of Natchez brothels during the same period reveals two prostitutes under the age of eighteen, including a fourteen-year old named Elizabeth Steele.<sup>21</sup>

The Civil War played a key role in bringing about an explosion in not only prostitution in Memphis, but also the prostitution of children. Beginning under Federal occupation in 1862 and continuing into the post-war period, refugees flooded into Memphis. These included widowed women or women separated from their husbands and with little means of support, homeless freedmen, and orphaned and abandoned children. The exact numbers are not clear, but the numbers proved sufficiently large that they posed a problem for city authorities. Thomas Hannah, Jr., a Union medical officer stationed in Memphis, gives some indication of the size of the refugee population in letters to his wife:

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<sup>20</sup> *Appeal*, August 23, 1871; Lindsey McMaster, *Working Girls in the West: Representations of Wage-Earning Women* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008), 92-93; Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 63; Schafer, *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women*, 47-59.

<sup>21</sup> 1860 United States Federal Census, Ward Three, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee, 30; 1850 United States Federal Census, Natchez, Adams County, Mississippi, 29.



I have often spoaken [sic] to you about the refugees that come inside of our lines more or less every day - chiefly women and children - while I was taking a run today to enjoy the [fresh air] I came to a large coton [sic] shed that was used formely for a coton whear [sic] house . . . but lately had been used for a government stable - well inside of this shed wear [sic] about 800 refugees women and children hear they wear poor things with thear [sic] gaunt and sickely [sic] looking faces with out food or means to buy with ... no friends to provide for them many of them wear [sic] sick with no medical help and thear was several corps[es] among them who had died and had not been taken away thear [sic] was one poor woman who had been confined the night before and her dead child lay by her side and she a dieing [sic] for the want of care ... my dear you can imagine what her sufferings are but I will not attempt to discribe [sic] the scenes of horror and Misery I seen then ....<sup>22</sup>

With inadequate facilities to care for displaced persons, these women and children turned to whatever means they had at hand to survive. The editor for the *Argus* wrote of being “shocked and pained” at reports of female refugees from Mississippi leaving “the path of virtue” and setting up houses of ill-fame in Chelsea. With soldiers crowding the city and sex in demand, children undoubtedly joined those who left the “path of virtue.” There is one recorded instance of a Union officer encouraging a refugee girl to adopt prostitution rather than provide her with material aid.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to refugees came hordes of orphans, dubbed “mackerels,” who formed a criminal underclass that supported themselves through theft and prostitution. The term “mackerel” may have derived from the manner in which the children moved about, like a school of fish, or from the English slang term for a pimp or procurer, the origin of the modern term “mack.” The press dubbed this notorious gang of orphaned and abandoned children the “Mackerel Brigade.” Groups of these children carried out a number of mass robberies on local businesses during Federal occupation. In 1864 Mackerels launched a series of smash and grab

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas Hannah to Elizabeth Hannah, January 31, 1863.

<sup>23</sup> *Argus*, April 22, 1865; *Bulletin*, April 13, 1865.

raids on the businesses of S.P.C., Clark & Co. and D.O. Gibson. Even after the end of Federal occupation, the roving gangs of children continued their activities: in 1868 the *Appeal* reported on the robbery of seven hundred dollars from a Mississippi freedman by the “Mackerel Brigade,” as well as a rash of pick pocketing on the levee. Dozens of accounts of crimes, mostly pick pocketing and theft, carried out by juvenile gangs during the late 1860s and early 70s can be found the Memphis papers. As late as 1873, the press complained of gangs of Mackerels who preyed upon newsboys in North Memphis and Chelsea through “brickbat and plunder.” Jacob Ackerman, alias “Jew” or “Jick Jack Kelly” headed the gang, along with Charles Kennedy, alias “Shinebug.” One of the leaders of the group took the alias “Pimp,” an indication the young boys and teenagers also made their living by procuring girls for houses of prostitution.<sup>24</sup>

The “Mackerel Brigade” began initially as a gang, but over time the term “mackerel” came to be applied generally to the groups of homeless children who roamed the city. An 1870 grand jury report complained that something had to be done to bring the homeless, orphaned “pests” under control through the establishment of a workhouse or refuge. Not that Memphis lacked orphan asylums; the St. Peter's and Leath Orphan asylums had existed since the 1850s, but they could only care for so many children. Both of these institutions faced problems of their own in feeding, clothing, and giving shelter to so many youths. Moreover, white southerners did little to ameliorate the suffering of black orphans. Martha Canfield, widow of the Colonel of the 71<sup>st</sup> Ohio Regiment, Herman Canfield, established the first Colored Orphan Asylum in Memphis. Canfield ministered not only to the needs of orphans, but also refugees and the sick in the surrounding area. Many Memphis orphans simply made their homes in haystacks, in doorways, next to chimneys, and supported themselves however they could. Some orphan boys worked as

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<sup>24</sup> *Bulletin*, January 26, 1864; *Appeal*, December 9, 1868, May 1, 1867, February 13, 1869; *Ledger*, February 12, 1873.

shoe shiners, but most turned to pilfering food to survive or engaging in more blatant forms of theft. How young girls survived remains less clear, as the press depicted “mackerels” as universally male. But many orphaned girls undoubtedly roamed the city, as attested by newspaper accounts. Young orphan girls operated as street hucksters, offering goods such as flowers or toothpicks, which presented opportunities for sexual liaisons with men. The money girls made from one encounter with a man far exceeded what they could make selling flowers. This led in short order to young working class and orphan girls adopting prostitution as a means of support.<sup>25</sup>

Figures during the Civil War are fragmentary, but the 1870 census reveals more child prostitutes operating in the city than a decade before. Rosa Lee of Tennessee and Mollie Welch of Missouri, thirteen and fifteen years old respectively, lived and worked together in a brothel kept by Sarah Flynn, an Englishwoman in the Pinch District. Many more black children worked as prostitutes following the war, a fact which reveals their poverty and desperation during Reconstruction, as well as the heightened vulnerability of African American girls to exploitation. Manda Davis and Josephine Collins, both fifteen, lived in a low brothel in the Third Ward that housed more children than adults. Five other children below the age of twelve lived in the house kept by Adaline Wright, a mixed-race woman. With nine people sharing a cramped tenement, the conditions these children faced are difficult to conceive. These child prostitutes did not operate on the edge of town, but in the heart of the city in the central business and governmental district of Memphis. Adaline Wright's house stood in an area known for its vice, situated at the intersection of Main and Washington Streets. A number of houses of prostitution, saloons, and

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., August 17, 1870; Carol Faulkner, *Women's Radical Reconstruction: The Freedmen's Aid Movement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) 167, n. 39; Marilyn Wood Hill, *Their Sisters' Keepers: Prostitution in New York City, 1830-1870* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 51.

other dives operated in the area, the most notorious being the “Temple of Virtue,” located on the southeast corner of Main and Washington.<sup>26</sup>

At least one black child prostitute in 1870 had a child of her own. Maria Johnson, thirteen, lived with her five-month old daughter, Effie, in a low brothel kept by Ella Evans. Evans and her husband, who also worked as a carpenter, appear to have taken in boarders who worked as prostitutes. This reveals that at least some child prostitutes turned to prostitution as a means of supporting their own children. It also reveals that everyday Memphians lived alongside and profited from child prostitution.<sup>27</sup>

The exact number of child prostitutes remains unclear, but numerous newspaper accounts attest to a widespread practice. During the period from the late 1850s to 1880, ten girls below the age of 16, some as young as twelve, have been positively identified as brothel prostitutes. Streetwalkers and girls who offered sexual favors on the side probably constituted the bulk of minor prostitutes in the city, but their numbers are impossible to determine. Nearly ten percent of all known prostitutes in Memphis between 1860 and 1870 came from the below eighteen age bracket. References to other unnamed child prostitutes in newspaper accounts, as well as evidence of several attempts to abduct children and force them into prostitution indicate a demand for child prostitutes. Relying on the evidence which exists, minor prostitutes made up somewhere between five and ten percent of the city's sex workers.<sup>28</sup>

For the less scrupulous madams and pimps of the city, the presence of so many abandoned and impoverished girls proved a boon. Orphan girls could be readily obtained to work in brothels, and with no protection from family and community, few would object to their being

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<sup>26</sup> 1870 United States Federal Census, Ward 2, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee, 37, Ward Three, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee, 38.

<sup>27</sup> 1870 United States Federal Census, Ward Three, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee, 12.

<sup>28</sup> Figures derived from the 1860, 1870, 1880, and 1900 U.S. Federal Censuses.

so employed. In some instances, young girls entered into a life of prostitution for want of other options, or because they had been shunned by society. Tales of abduction suggest that madams and procurers forced most young into the scarlet trade. These tales, however, must be taken with a grain of salt. Veteran sex workers repeatedly asserted that “white slavery,” the forcible prostitution of women and girls, did not exist. Nell Kimball, a madam who operated in St. Louis, New Orleans, and San Francisco, and who counted Memphis women among her boarders, vociferously denied that prostitutes worked against their will. “Most American girls become whores of their own free will,” Kimball remarked in her memoirs. “I’m not saying force and cruelty don’t exist, but it’s not as big as some people think. Whores were often great flimflam artists and told big lies.” Historians have supported this assertion. The majority of women worked as prostitutes out of economic necessity, not out of force. The notion of “white slavery” upheld a Victorian mythos of pure womanhood ruined by male destroyers.<sup>29</sup>

This does not mean, however, that madams and johns did not exploit children or that coercion did not exist. When Kimball says “most” women entered prostitution willingly, she is also justifying her way of life to herself and others. That child prostitution existed, often in the open, is inescapable; that procurers and madams exploited the youthful naïveté of children is without doubt. Men and madams sought girls because of their inability to bear children and the lower likelihood of carrying sexually transmitted diseases. In addition, as Timothy Gilfoyle notes in his research on New York, men believed sexual intercourse with virgins cured a man of venereal disease. The sex trade and the wider culture highly prized the virginity of girls, or the semblance of it. Orphan girls found themselves caught between the demand for virginal maidens as sex objects and virginal maidens as the ideal of respectable girlhood.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Nell Kimball, *Nell Kimball: Her Life as an American Madam* (Macmillan, 1970), 142.

<sup>30</sup> Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 69. Virgins were so highly prized that even in lower class areas like Five Points, sex with

Stories of abduction and enticement into Memphis houses of ill-fame became common in the early 1870s. Memphis editors promoted these human interest stories because they both sold papers and resonated with a developing conception of sex workers as noble victims. These stories should be viewed as texts which chart the rise of a progressive reform impulse, then common throughout the United States and Great Britain, culminating in an attempt to reform prostitutes and stamp out vice. But these stories also indicate that help to victimized women and children often remained contingent upon class and racial markers. There are no tales of freedmen inveigled into houses of prostitution. The press looked with suspicion on the stories of working-class girls who claimed to have been misled by procurers.

One case, that of Mary Austin, illustrates not only the vulnerability of orphan children – even when married – but also how society expected girls to struggle to the utmost to protect their reputation when faced with abduction. In September of 1870, Austin, a sixteen-year-old Missouri orphan, fled from the brothel of Annie Gallagher, “bareheaded and carrying a bundle of clothes in her hand.” A passing policeman took her to the station house and recorded her story, which the *Daily Appeal* reprinted. Mary claimed her husband Dick, who later abandoned her for an Arkansas prostitute, initially decoyed her into a floating brothel on the Mississippi River. Determined to escape, Mary climbed into a skiff tied to the aft of the boat and floated down river. After having been rescued by a steamboat captain and brought to Memphis, Ed Smith, a paramour of madam Annie Gallagher, waylaid Mary. Smith offered her a “splendid place” and intimated he operated a boarding house. This became a common feature of stories of abduction and enticement: that of shrewd, well-dressed men and women promising safety and shelter or employment to simple country girls.<sup>31</sup>

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virgins cost ten dollars.

<sup>31</sup> *Appeal*, September 3, 1870.

Smith conducted her to the “boarding house” on Jefferson Street in his carriage, promising to send for her things the next day. The door to the “boarding house” featured an array of bolts and locks, probably intended to not only keep miscreants outside, but imprisoned girls inside. Mary soon realized she had again been decoyed into a house of prostitution. Of what occurred during her first night in Annie Gallagher's brothel, Mary would say nothing, a decision which may have been calculated to preserve her virtue in the eyes of the public. “I will not tell you about what happened there,” she stated to the *Appeal*, “You can imagine it, and I felt like I did on the boat, that I would rather die than stay there. All night long I sat up and cried.” Whether Ed Smith or some other customer attempted to rape Mary is unclear. She mentions rather ominously that “He – Ed Smith – was there.” The next morning, as a messenger delivered Mary's clothes from where she had been staying the day before, Mary forced her way out past the housekeeper and escaped.<sup>32</sup>

Even though Mary escaped from the brothel of Annie Gallagher, she did not escape from the court of public opinion. The truth of Mary's claims rested upon whether or not her virtue could be established, a matter that had to be determined through an examination of her physiognomy and class markers. No one, particularly a respectable male figure, could vouch for Mary Austin. The writer for the *Appeal* described Mary as having a “pretty good figure” and being “altogether very attractive.” Even as the author attempted to defend Mary's virtue, he appealed to a prurient interest in her physical charms. She looked, he continued, “as though she might have come from gentle parents, though she can neither write nor read.” The high breeding so apparent in Mary's physiognomy manifested itself in her attractiveness and youthful visage. She did not bear the appearance of a haggard prostitute, and rather than being seemingly

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

“unsexed,” had the manner of a virtuous woman. Her illiteracy, however, indicated her lower class origin, in which case her claims might be viewed as suspect. “Her struggle to maintain her virtue,” the reporter for the *Appeal* continued, “is one that (provided all that she recites is true) must command the admiration and respect of all men not utterly devoid of honor.” Mary's claim to possessing virtue had to be substantiated in order for her to elicit the full support of the community and the law. Despite the development of a sympathetic ideology regarding prostitutes which transformed them into “Magdalenes,” public opinion regarding prostitutes in Memphis relied on class and physiological markers. A young woman's alleged virtue relied more so on whether or not she possessed certain class traits or could count on the good word of an elite male associate.<sup>33</sup>

Another account illustrates how the press looked to physiognomy and class markers as evidence of an orphan's virtue, but also how decisive the word of an elite male friend could be in these cases. In January of 1873, fifteen-year-old Maggie Morris, an orphan from Missouri, traveled from St. Louis to Memphis to find her brother. After not finding her brother, Morris met a woman, Lizzie Clark, who had lived in her neighborhood in St. Louis. Willing to trust a familiar face, Morris followed Clark to a low brothel called “Nobody's Block,” one of “a row of poor wooden buildings near the county jail,” kept by a woman known as Sarah Howell. According to Morris, the madam “persisted in asking me to make the acquaintance of men coming to the house, which I thank God I refused to do, it being the dying request of my dear mother to always properly conduct myself.” An unnamed young man, “respectably connected within the city,” found Morris in the brothel and insisted she be conducted to his mother's house. Morris readily agreed to accompany him, claiming that “I had threatened to leave [Howell] the

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.



first chance she would give me.” Madam Howell, claiming Morris had been abducted from her by the young man, sent the police after them. But when Morris told the officer her story, the police arrested Howell. The recorder fined Howell \$100 and ordered her to give \$5,000 dollars in bond for her appearance before the criminal court. The reporter for the *Appeal* described Morris as “plainly clad, rather attractive in appearance, and possessing an innocent face.” Unlike with Mary Austin, no one doubted Morris’s innocence, a fact which hinged on the presence of a “respectably connected” male. The identity of this “young man” is unknown, but almost invariably the elites who appear in these stories are never named by the press.<sup>34</sup>

When the daughters of elite families faced abduction, the details remained vague or intentionally withheld by the press, such as in the case of Charles Reynolds, accused of “abducting a young girl of respectability away from her home.” The unnamed young woman may have simply been caught in a tryst with Reynolds, and in an effort to preserve their daughter's honor, the family brought charges against him. The pair may also have eloped together. Whatever the facts of the matter, a double standard existed in the manner in which the press reported on the daughters of elite families and working-class children. Even if, as in the case of Mary Austin, every exertion had been put forth to guard her virtue, she could still be called into question because of her uncertain upbringing and the lack of anyone to vouch for her good name.<sup>35</sup>

Maggie Morris' mother's “dying request,” that she “properly conduct” herself, indicates the importance of female chastity to nineteenth century Americans. Young orphaned girls lived under the strictures of a gender order that demanded they defend their feminine virtue at all costs

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<sup>34</sup> *Appeal*, January 28, 1873; *Ledger*, March 10, 1873; *Avalanche*, January 28, 1873. The *Ledger* later revealed that Morris had lied about her past life and in fact had indeed worked as a prostitute. In March of 1873 she ran away from St. Peter's Orphan asylum with a horse thief.

<sup>35</sup> *Ledger*, January 7, 1869.

or be cast into the outer darkness of shame and infamy. Many believed that a loss of virtue for a young girl inevitably led to prostitution and “ruin.” Laws regarding the seduction and abduction of young girls did not offer much protection to orphans. Elite men crafted such laws to protect females with family ties; a daughter's loss of chastity left her without marriage prospects, a reality which negatively affected the wealth and reputation of her parents. Orphans, lacking family ties, proved easier prey for pimps and madams because no one could vouch for them. In the case of Mary Austin, the alleged abductor Ed Smith, got both himself and the madam Annie Gallagher off the hook for abduction through “adroit management.” The prosecution failed to convict the pair in spite of the fact that Gallagher had a history of abducting young girls. In 1871, the criminal court tried her for kidnapping a young girl named Clara Evans for the purposes of prostitution. On another occasion Gallagher held the daughter of one of her boarders as security for the payment of a debt. Mary Austin failed to sufficiently prove she had been virtuous prior to arriving in Gallagher's brothel, while Morris could rely on the testimony of an elite male.<sup>36</sup>

According to the statutes of 1871, in cases of seduction, which constituted a separate category from abduction, women and girls “could not be interrogated as to whether she had carnal knowledge with other men,” for that would subject them to the penalties of the Act of 1841, forbidding fornication. But by the mid-1870s the Tennessee Legislature omitted the Act of 1841 and Tennessee had no statute making fornication and adultery criminal offenses *per se*. This meant that now women could be interrogated regarding their sexual history. The same statutes made it illegal for anyone to inveigle any female “before reputed virtuous, to a house of ill-fame” for the purposes of prostitution or “lewdness.” Ironically, the 1841 statute forbidding fornication protected some women from being questioned regarding their prior sexual history.

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<sup>36</sup> Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*, 67; *Appeal*, September 3, 1870, February 3, 1871; *Ledger*, July 18, 1872.

But by the mid-1870s, the law changed: if a girl could not prove her virtue, then she would not be protected under statutes governing seduction or abduction for the purposes of prostitution.<sup>37</sup>

Kinship ties protected most young girls from being enticed into prostitution, but in some instances, even girls with family ties wound up in sex work. Mollie Clarke, a Memphis madam, allegedly enticed twelve-year-old Ellen Tuttle, an adopted orphan into her house for the purpose of prostitution in the early 1870s. Ellen's adopted father, R.M. Tuttle, a traveling merchant, was out of town when Clarke allegedly lured her away. Before he could return, Ellen died of an unknown cause. In May of 1874, Ruth Carroll, “a simple minded but honest and virtuous girl, from Jonesboro, East Tennessee” came to Memphis in search of her sister, Jennie Miller. Not finding her sister, Ruth began to look for work in Memphis, a task that proved difficult. One day while walking on Court Square, a man named Charles Gilbert offered to give her a place to stay. Gilbert conveyed her to a brothel kept by Maggie Quinn, but Quinn refused to cooperate with Gilbert's scheme and called the police. Within a week the court sentenced Gilbert to five years in the penitentiary. In this instance, the existence of family ties worked in the victim's favor. Family members, however, did not always protect their female kin. Sexual abuse by parents or guardians sent some children into sex work at an early age. The police found W.B. Worsham with his thirteen-year-old step-daughter in a house of assignation kept by Mag Williams in April of 1878.<sup>38</sup>

Not all girls faced abduction. Madams persuaded or induced girls to consent to sexual encounters with men. Papers spoke of the “art of the procuress” that led young girls astray. Procurers such as Mag Williams gained the confidence of young girls through promising them

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<sup>37</sup> Seymour D. Thompson, *A Compilation of the Statute Laws of the State of Tennessee*, Vol. II (St. Louis, 1872), 119, 1177.

<sup>38</sup> *Ledger*, February 12 1872, May 27, 1874; *Appeal*, April 14, 1878.

gifts. Others persuaded them with talk of the excitement of a harlot's life. A letter from a procurer to a Memphis child being groomed for prostitution reveals that promises of excitement and novelty held powerful attraction for girls sheltered in restrictive home environments or who worked long hours to help support their families. "I know you will be satisfied," a procurer wrote of the life of a sex worker, "for there is so much fun, and it is such a gay, fast life, and you were always a gay, good girl." Toward the end of his letter, the anonymous procurer adds, "don't you ever let your mother know where you are."<sup>39</sup>

Memphis procurers often relied upon promises of employment in respectable houses or places to live. In August of 1873, an "innocent, confiding, and unsuspecting country girl" by the name of Eliza Cartrett Gilliland traveled via Memphis from Ripley, Tennessee to reach her adopted home of Jacksonport, Arkansas. When it seemed her money would run out and that she would have no means of paying for the remainder of her trip, Gilliland went into the streets of Memphis and attempted to sell a patch quilt. This attracted the attention of Alice Cromwell, alias Long Alice, a Nashville madam visiting Memphis to recruit girls for her establishment. Cromwell allegedly told Gilliland she could give her a place to stay, and if dissatisfied she would pay for her trip to Jacksonport. A familiar story played itself out again: Gilliland took Cromwell "for a lady of refinement, and never once suspected her want of character until after arriving at her house" in Nashville. Cromwell quickly attempted to put Gilliland to work and drum up business from potential johns by advertising that she "had a maiden." When one male visitor expressed doubts as to Gilliland's virginity, she said "she would swear it; that she got her from Arkansas." Before Gilliland could be raped, she fled from Long Alice's brothel and sought the protection of the police. W.H. Yates, Nashville's chief of police, filed suit against Long Alice for

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<sup>39</sup> *Ledger*, August 27, 1880.

\$15,000 in damages, and charged her with “inveigling and enticing” Eliza Gilliland into a house of prostitution.<sup>40</sup>

Eliza Gilliland gave preliminary testimony from a sickbed; it quickly became apparent that she not only concealed her marriage to a man, but also her pregnancy. She charged her husband, Frank Gilliland, with cruelty, and of being “jealous” of her without cause. She fled from her allegedly cruel husband, and equally cruel mother-in-law, to return to where she had been raised. At the time of the preliminary hearings, Eliza had not seen her husband for at least six weeks, and facts came to light to suggest Eliza may have been intimately involved with one of their neighbors. Those who knew Eliza, with the exception of her husband and her mother-in-law, attested to her virtue. But to make matters worse for Eliza, Alice Cromwell's seventeen-year-old “son” Gabriel Caldwell, testified that Gilliland wanted to work as a prostitute. Caldwell testified that no love existed between him and Alice Cromwell, and that he had merely spoken the truth. The case went to trial, but the ultimate outcome is unknown. Gilliland fits the profile of a woman who sought out prostitution: fleeing from a cruel husband and family and seeking subsistence. Given the overwhelming evidence from locals who could testify to Eliza Gilliland's virtue, it is likely the court found Cromwell guilty of enticement.<sup>41</sup>

“Long” Alice Cromwell's claim that she “had a maiden” indicates young girls could command higher prices. Children who made their way into prostitution probably commanded higher prices than older prostitutes and attracted a wealthier clientele. Charles Gilbert, who abducted Ruth Carter, solicited customers on Court Square. He offered to arrange sexual encounters with Carter for ten dollars, more than what most laborers made in a week. This indicates that some child prostitutes may have been a luxury that only wealthier customers could

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<sup>40</sup> *Appeal*, August 21, 30, 1873; *Public Ledger*, August 21, 1873.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, August 30, 1873.

afford.<sup>42</sup>

An undercover investigation into the prostitution of minors in the 1880s revealed that elite men indeed paid for sex with young girls. In September of 1884, Deputy Sheriff Joseph Thiers infiltrated a ring of African American washerwomen who acted as intermediaries between johns and women seeking pay for sexual encounters. Their base of operations, a small frame cottage on the west side of Causey Street (later renamed Hadden Avenue), about half a block from Beale, gave the appearance of being nothing more than the home of a washerwoman. Respectable men and women, who veiled their faces, frequently visited the establishment, ostensibly to drop off and pick up their laundry. An investigation by Thiers uncovered a house of assignation which catered to the city's elite men. The woman who ran the house, Mag Williams, also offered young girls below the age of sixteen -- both black and white -- to her clients. Williams promised one fifteen-year-old girl, "still spotless as the snow," inducements in the form of "all the fine dresses and bonnets she desired," which her could not afford. Thiers never brought charges against Williams, probably because of the damage it would have done to a number of respectable Memphis families. He merely warned those associated with the house they would face arrest if their activities continued.<sup>43</sup>

These stories of abduction, seduction, and threatened virtue became common fixtures of the Memphis papers between the Civil War and 1900. They constituted an unmistakable critique of the decline in patriarchal control and the rise of industrial capitalism. Industrialization and urbanization had come later to the South than at the North, and the prevalence of images of country rubes duped by shrewd, immoral city dwellers may indicate that the acceptance of a "morally neutral market" remained uneven. The added element of gender and the breakdown of

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., May 19, 26, 27, 1874.

<sup>43</sup> *Appeal*, September 18, 1884; This lot was excavated by archaeologists in 2003.

patriarchal authority only heightened the potency of these images. The rise of a more impersonal, urbanized mode of life undermined patriarchal control, and threatened to destroy familial institutions. The evidence indicates that the press repackaged these stories to fit a template of rural innocence and established gender order versus the wickedness and gender inversion of the city. Confiding, innocent country girls were not always the paragons of virtue wider society imagined them to be.<sup>44</sup>

To modern observers, the facts of child abduction and open child prostitution are particularly horrifying. But the men who sought out sexual encounters with young girls were not, as Christine Stansell argues, “interlopers lurking at the edges of ordinary life,” but lodgers, grocers and occasionally fathers. Sex with female children was “woven into the fabric of life in the tenements and the streets,” and while certainly out of the ordinary, not extraordinary. Stansell further suggests, unconvincingly, that nineteenth century Americans did not regard sexual encounters with children with the same horror as modern observers. In court documents, men described their involvements with children as being nothing more than a “slightly illicit” kind of play. When asked about his alleged rape of Lizzie Sherwood, Memphis fisherman William Johnson replied that he took the girl in his lap and “commenced fooling with and fondling her.” When asked what he meant by “fooling and fondling,” he replied, “Oh, well, you know, when a man goes into a house of prostitution and the woman of the house sends a girl to you, you fool and fondle with her.” Johnson claimed Lizzie's mother had offered her to him as a “sweetheart.” The line between child molestation, play, and prostitution often blurred in the working class tenements along the bluff.

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<sup>44</sup> Christopher Clark, “The Consequences of the Market Revolution in the American North” in Melvyn Stokes, ed., *The Market Revolution in America* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 32; see also Harry L. Watson, “Slavery and Development in a Dual Economy: The South and the Market Revolution,” in the same volume.

This does not mean, however, that nineteenth-century Memphians regarded such behavior as normal. It is clear that while child prostitution may not have shocked the sensibilities of Memphians in the manner it shocks observers today, the rape and seduction of children did. The press referred to William Johnson as a “fiend” and a “burly monster.” Even the city's prostitutes regarded Johnson's actions as vile, taking up a collection among the brothels of the city to assist Lizzie Sherwood's family.<sup>45</sup>

When young women struck back at their seducers, including the use of deadly force, Memphians approved. In 1886, Emma Norment walked up behind Henry Arnold outside of his store on Beale Street and shot him in the back at point-blank range. Arnold died two minutes later. After a policeman arrested her, Norment commented that she “put the ball in the right place” to effect instantaneous death. The trial became one of the most sensational in Memphis history. The courtroom filled to standing room only and it took fifteen minutes for the sheriff to usher witnesses to the stand. Attorneys for the defense and prosecution, G.P.M. Turner and P.M. Winters, respectively, showed up for trial in a state of noticeable intoxication. In addition, two local feminists, Lide Meriwether and Elizabeth Saxon, sat next to the judge to show support for Norment and to ensure the courtroom proceedings did not cast aspersions on her virtue.<sup>46</sup>

Witnessed testified that Arnold bragged to friends about seducing Norment and another unnamed girl. He promised to marry Norment, but confessed to multiple witnesses of his unwillingness to do so. “Well, promises,” Arnold confided to one friend, “you know, are like pie-crusts, easily broken.” Witnesses implied, but avoided directly stating, that Norment embraced a life of prostitution after her “fall” from virtue, but this does not seem to have mattered to the jury. Norment undoubtedly killed Arnold, but the defense relied up on an unwritten law that allowed

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<sup>45</sup> *Appeal*, June 29, July 3, 1879.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, April 1, 2, 1886.



men and women to kill in cases of sexual dishonor. The defense also relied upon the growing conception of prostitutes as victims. In his closing remarks, defense attorney James Greer sang word-for-word the gospel song “The Ninety and Nine,” which speaks of wayward sheep sought by a forgiving God. The jurors, with tears streaming down their faces, returned a verdict of “not guilty.”<sup>47</sup>

Elizabeth Saxon, who sat in the courtroom throughout Norment's trial, left with the conviction that age of consent laws needed drastic reform:

Until a ban of protection is made to secure innocent girls from the vile seducer's art, until the age of consent is raised in every state in this Union from the shameful condition now in, from ten to seventeen years (and it is only women's effort that can raise it), until then I will be found in courts or wherever else duty calls, laboring, with pen and tongue.

For six years, Lide Meriwether and Elizabeth Saxon campaigned for an increase in the age of consent. In 1893, the legislature did just that, increasing the age of consent to sixteen. Several years later, the legislature raised it to eighteen. Reformers regarded this a great triumph and a safeguard for young girls against seduction and prostitution.<sup>48</sup>

These stories of victimized girls may give the impression that most prostitutes only entered the sex trade because they had been seduced or abducted. This could not be further from the truth. Newspapers promoted such stories because they fit the common conception of prostitution as being primarily characterized by victimized young girls and women, rather than women adopting sex work as a means of survival or autonomy. These stories of abduction, rape

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.; Franks Charles Smith, Lucien Brock Proctor, eds. *The American Lawyer*, Vol. 3 (New York, 1895), 541, 542; Robert M. Ireland, “Frenzied and Fallen Females: Women and Sexual Dishonor in the Nineteenth Century United States,” *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Fall 1992) 95-117.

<sup>48</sup> *Appeal*, April 4, 1886; Margaret Caffrey, “‘A Life of larger Thought and Activity:’ Lide Meriwether, from Local to Statewide to National Reformer” in Beverly Greene Bond, Sarah Wilkerson, eds., *Tennessee Women: Their Lives and Times*, Vol. 2 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015).

and abuse, however, are too common to ignore. In this era men saw coerced sex as their prerogative, and the seduction and rape of girls played an important role in shaping prostitution in Memphis.

### **“If you send me back I swear to kill myself.” Prostitutes and Reformers**

On December 10, 1880, just after the clock in the parlor struck eleven, Dixie Wagner tied a rope to her bedstead and threw it down from the third story window of the Mission Home for “fallen women” on Alabama Street. Earlier that day, three of her former companions, “soiled doves,” came to visit her; one secreted the rope in question under her dress, a rope sturdy enough to support a sprightly woman of eighteen years. A male admirer arranged Wagner's escape, who being barred due to his sex, relied on the access of her female friends. Dixie came to the Mission Home only six days previously. She elected to come to the reformatory in order to escape a six-month sentence on President's Island for “insulting” a woman on the street. Her crime: addressing a well-to-do gentleman by his first name in the presence of his wife. When given the choice between six months of hard labor on mosquito-infested President's Island with hardened criminals, or a cloistered life in the reformatory, she tearfully promised to turn over a new leaf.<sup>49</sup>

Wagner did not like the routine of the reform home. The matron made her perform housework, memorize a daily passage from Scripture, and required her to attend morning and evening prayer services. To make matters worse, the house thronged with noisy children: infants, toddlers, adolescents. This stood in stark contrast to the life she led just days before: dances, trips to the theater, entertaining admirers at her St. Martin Street lodgings, and socializing with the

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<sup>49</sup> *Appeal*, December 4, 10, 11, 1880.

other girls of the “monde.” When Wagner's friends arrived and called out to her from the darkness below, Dixie slid down the rope. She ripped the skin from her hands in the process, and scampered off into the night with her companions in a waiting hack. As the clock struck midnight, Wagner boarded a train for St. Louis. Waving a handkerchief to her friends with her injured hand, she remarked, “Ta-ta! I'll come back after a while!”<sup>50</sup>

Had Dixie Wagner cared to read that day's edition of the *Appeal*, she would have found a letter from Elizabeth Avery Meriwether, a family friend, coming to her defense. Meriwether considered Dixie's mother, who occasionally took in sewing for her, a close friend. As the city's most prominent feminist activist, Meriwether would not take the attacks on Dixie's character lying down. During 1872, Meriwether published her own newspaper, the *Tablet*, an organ Meriwether used to promote her views on women's suffrage and pay equality. Her sister-in-law, Lide Meriwether, also advocated in particular for “fallen women.”<sup>51</sup>

Unaware that Dixie planned to escape from the Mission Home later that day, Meriwether described Wagner as a “helpless” victim of male perfidy; that she had been deluded by bad men. “Dixie belongs to a slave class,” she thundered, “every woman with brains to think knows that the wretched class to which Dixie belongs are in a worse slavery than ever the negroes lived in.” Meriwether's hyperbolic language grew as the letter progressed:

The women of that class [prostitutes] are literally under the brutal heels of the most brutal of the master class. Every woman further knows that this prostitute business is unnatural, is directly contrary to the instincts of the natural woman; therefore, it is the outgrowth of the unnatural condition of slavery in which women are held.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., April 14, 1878, December 11, 1880.

<sup>51</sup> Marsha Wedell, *Elite Women and the Reform Impulse in Memphis*, 23.

<sup>52</sup> *Appeal*, December 10, 1880.

Meriwether claimed Dixie received public scorn for exposing the duplicity of a respectable man in public, what she called “giving the man away,” not for “insulting” a woman. As a helpless victim duped by men, and with no endowments or skills beyond her “pretty face,” male domination doomed Dixie to a life of prostitution. Dixie's case underscored the need for the enfranchisement of women, Meriwether argued, but also the necessity of industrial schools to train and discipline the class of women who turned to prostitution. Dixie Wagner seemed an ideal candidate for the Mission Home.<sup>53</sup>

Meriwether could not accept that Wagner's embrace of sex work and youth culture emerged out of anything but male oppression. That she might have preferred the life of a demimondaine, with its freedom from middle-class constraint and working class drudgery, Meriwether could not admit. When Dixie's escape became public knowledge the next day, the *Appeal* gloatingly remarked that it “destroys the effect of all the sentimental gush that has been written and published about her from time to time.” Meriwether must have been deeply chagrined.<sup>54</sup>

This episode reveals a chief error of middle-class reformers with regard to prostitution: they could not admit that some women embraced a life of prostitution for reasons other than seduction or “ruin.” As Barbara Meil Hobson has found, “middle-class reformers could not grasp the motivations, moral codes, and survival strategies” of the women they sought to help. The belief in the natural purity of women formed the cornerstone of middle-class reformer's ideology. The city papers relentlessly promoted the notion that women were decoyed, abducted, and seduced into a life of prostitution. This had some basis in fact, but the lived experience of many

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., December 11, 1880.

women in the sex trade differed greatly.<sup>55</sup>

Wagner, who embarked on a life of prostitution at the age of fifteen, did not come from poverty, nor had she been abducted or forced into sex work. Dixie's father worked as a tailor and her grandfather worked as a bricklayer to support their kindred between 1850 and 1880. Dixie's mother took in sewing, working hard to ensure Dixie would not have to drop out of school. With an education and “industrious” parents, Dixie hardly inhabited the lowest rung of Memphis society. By all accounts, she seemed an ideal candidate for the Mission Home: a young woman who, through her education and upbringing, would be more receptive to the message of reform. But Dixie, like other young women of the middling sort, embraced prostitution for its supposed independence and romance, not from economic necessity or “ruin.”<sup>56</sup>

And Dixie embraced the life of a fast youth with gusto. Throughout the late 1870s she had dalliances with a variety of admirers and lived the life of a kept woman. In 1878 a man attempted suicide after she left him for another lover. Reformers, however, remained steadfast in their belief that as naturally sexless beings, women were the victims and slaves of male lust. This belief, along with an inability to overcome notions of class and race, crippled reformer's efforts in Memphis.<sup>57</sup>

Memphians built two reformatories for the reclamation of prostitutes between 1875 and 1900. Elizabeth Fisher Johnson, head of the Women's Christian Association, established the largest of these. Heavily influenced by emerging feminist ideas and evangelical notions of reform, imbibed in part through teachers trained at the Emma Willard School in New York, Johnson established the Memphis WCA as a form of municipal housekeeping. Johnson and like-

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<sup>55</sup> Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*, 5.

<sup>56</sup> *Appeal*, December 10, 1880.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, April 14, 1878.

minded elite women sought to extend their vision of domesticity from their parlors into the wider world. This included visiting the poor, distributing food and clothing, training women in domestic skills such as sewing, and establishing an intelligence office that provided jobs. In 1876 the WCA established the Mission Home for wayward girls and prostitutes, which later expanded into a home for orphaned and poor children. By the 1880s the WCA operated the most important philanthropic organization in the city.<sup>58</sup>

Historians have assessed the activities of the Women's Christian Association and their Mission Home primarily through the lens of the reformers themselves. Mazie Hough presents the WCA's activities in its early years of operation as a “radical” challenge to the patriarchal social order. She finds that even though the Association excluded women of color, the Mission Home offered opportunities to white sex workers, single mothers, and other “fallen women” that their reputation and class origin would not have normally allowed. Hough paints an optimistic picture of the first two decades of the Mission's operation, particularly in the solidarity which existed between the elite operators of the Mission and the lower class inmates. Hough asserts the association betrayed its formerly radical principles and embraced the belief that ultimately men protected female virtue. By the 1930s the Mission closed its doors because it no longer appealed to the women it had been founded to serve. Rather than offering a hand up, it now worked to maintain dominant notions of virtue and shame.<sup>59</sup>

The activities of the WCA cannot be understood independently of the class interests of its members and their spouses. The WCA's board of directors came from the elite of Memphis and their spouses engaged in professions traditionally hostile to vice interests. Nine women on various WCA boards between the Association's inception and 1908 were married to cotton

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<sup>58</sup> Wedell, *Elite Women*, 31-35.

<sup>59</sup> Hough, “The Treatment of Unwed Mothers in Tennessee,” 100-106.

factors, commission merchants, or wholesale grocers. These men, who dominated city politics prior to the Civil War, struggled to purify the city and transform it from a rough river town to an orderly commercial center. Since the end of the Civil War, a new class of small shopkeepers and saloon operators dominated city politics. These men made common cause with vice interests by protecting madams and operators of gambling parlors. The political power of ward politicians, many of whom operated saloons, derived from bribes and political support from madams and gamblers<sup>60</sup>.

The women of the WCA served their husbands' economic and political interests by attacking prostitution. This not only served to discipline the labor force and contribute to public order, but also to undermine the power base of the petty bourgeois politicians who had displaced their husbands since the Civil War. In addition, the women of the Association inculcated domestic skills in order to transform unruly women into servants. Elite women complained incessantly about the lack of good servants following the end of slavery. The Association established the Mission Home and its employment office in part to fill this need. In this way also, the Mission Home cannot be understood independent of the class interests of the women who established it.<sup>61</sup>

This does not mean the women of the WCA did not have genuine concern for “fallen women.” The inculcation of middle-class ideas of decorum and evangelical morality should not be viewed as a cynical top-down imposition of elite control. Women of the upper classes of Memphis believed in the transformative power of these ideals and wanted to bring them to their fallen sisters. Unfortunately, the manner in which they carried this out involved coercion.

Young women encountered many temptations to the life of a courtesan in the streets,

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<sup>60</sup> Wedell, 149 n. 22.

<sup>61</sup> Hough, 105-106.

shops, and parlors of nineteenth century Memphis. The visibility of prostitutes in the streets of the city posed a threat to young girls and families because they exhibited an allegedly independent lifestyle of self-indulgence and ease. The upper crust of the demimonde dressed well in the height of fashion, wore seemingly expensive jewelry, and rode in elegant hacks. They attended the most fashionable parties and “fast,” dashing young men squired them about town. The factors which could draw a young woman to prostitution were found not only in the sights in the city but in the popular novels young girls read. Prostitute Florence Powers recounted how she had been drawn to the fast life after reading the novels of “Ouida,” a pseudonym for Maria Louise Ramé, who wrote “racy” novels of adventure and romance. Prostitution not only offered money to girls, it offered a sense of autonomy from the control of parents and an entrance into the urban youth culture embodied in the lifestyle of the demimonde. Prior to the First World War, most workingwomen could not afford to live on their own in boardinghouses; prostitution provided the means for girls to do so. Funds from prostitution could also purchase fancy clothing, a further declaration of individual autonomy from the rule of parents and bourgeois self-control. Such self-indulgence ran counter to what parents expected of their children.<sup>62</sup>

Some sex workers turned to prostitution as a means of breaking loose from the control of parents and society, and stood prepared to fight to maintain their place in the demimonde. In 1885, Mrs. Mills swore out a warrant against Ida Eastwood, charging her with keeping a house of ill-fame at 133 Main Street. She also swore out a warrant against her nineteen-year old daughter, Daisy Mills, charging her with being an inmate of the same house of ill-fame. Daisy declared her mother's motive “purely a selfish one” and that “she was angry because she declined to live at home and give her the money she received from her admirers.” Daisy then went home,

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<sup>62</sup> *Appeal*, January 15, 1887; Christine Stansell, “Working Women and Prostitution in Nineteenth Century New York,” 244.



“broke up all the furniture” and “gave her mother a sound beating.”<sup>63</sup>

In spite of the strong affinity some young women had for the fast life of a demimondaine, others sought help in escaping from the harsh, degrading, and violent world of sex work.

Evidence suggests that many did find the Mission a great help. In addition to food and shelter, the Mission provided fellowship, encouragement, and education. In a letter to the *Gleaner*, the publication of the Women's Christian Association, a former inmate wrote, “I would like to be back in the home, if only for one evening, and hear the same voices in the chapel, and go over the lessons once again. There I received so much help and so much strength.” The Association printed several similar testimonials in the *Gleaner* and in the city papers.<sup>64</sup>

But the number of sex workers who wrote these testimonials remains unclear. Not all women who entered the Mission worked as prostitutes. The Association described many as “wayward girls” who had been sent there by parents because they had fallen into bad associations, or women who had no home or means of support. Orphaned children or children whose parents could not afford to care for them made up the vast majority of those who lived in the Mission. We should take care, therefore, in assuming how sex workers might have viewed the Mission from these letters. However, given that the Home served roughly 50 women a year, it is likely that many of those successfully “reformed” came from the ranks of sex workers.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to say just how many.<sup>65</sup>

Some prostitutes and madams viewed the Mission Home favorably, even as a means to reenter respectable society. In 1882, Madam Sarah O'Brien sent a teenage girl who attempted to take up residence in her brothel to the Mission Home. O'Brien may have considered this girl too

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<sup>63</sup> *Appeal*, November 14, 1885.

<sup>64</sup> *Avalanche*, June 3, 1883, June 17, 1884; *Gleaner* No. 5, March 1892; For other testimonials see Mazie Hough, *Rural Unwed Mothers: An American Experience, 1870-1950* (London: Routledge, 2010), 59.

<sup>65</sup> Hough, 106-110.

young or grew suspicious of her origins. The discovery of an elite daughter in a brothel could potentially be ruinous for a madam. In one instance, a madam sent a prostitute to the Mission out of clear concern for her well-being. In 1883, Pauline Livingston sent one of her boarders, Minnie Allen, to the Mission. Livingston formerly adopted Allen, whose real name was Adele Arlington, and named her as a beneficiary of her will. Arlington would inherit a portion of Livingston's estate on the condition that she remain in the Mission Home and leave the demimonde.<sup>66</sup>

But the experiences of other sex workers suggest a more negative view of the Mission Home and the city's reformers. Some women resented the Mission for its restraints on their personal autonomy. Many voluntarily entered the Home, but others had been placed there against their will and held as prisoners. Many of those sequestered unwillingly came from the ranks of prostitutes under the age of eighteen. A significant number of inmates do not appear to have remained long in the reformatory and the matron listed them as "leaving without permission." Drug addiction also appears to have influenced women to leave the home. Other women remained for longer periods of time in the Mission, only to drift back into sex work when it became difficult for them to support themselves with the meager wages available to female laborers.

Based on fragmentary figures between 1880 and 1886, approximately 15 to 20 percent of inmates left the Mission Home without permission. In some instances, this took the form of escapes. A nineteen-year old woman by the name of Smith ran away from the Mission Home in 1879. She refused to return to the house of reformation or to her parents, who she claimed were "too poor to support her." A Memphis reporter spoke with her and commented that "She prefers to be an inmate of a house of ill-fame, and will pursue that course of life as long as she can. She

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<sup>66</sup> *Appeal*, May 30, 1882, September 1, 1886; Pauline Barclay (Livingston) probate record, 1880-05444, SCA.

wishes people would let her alone and attend to their own business.” In 1888, Lillie Howard and Katie Pierce climbed over the back wall of the Mission Home and escaped; it is unknown whether they ever returned.<sup>67</sup>

The police brought an orphan named Clara Gordon, about eighteen years of age, to the Mission Home on three occasions against her will. Despite being crippled in one leg, she escaped on two occasions by crawling through a hole in the cow pen behind the house. She remained adamant that she would continue to work as a prostitute, ignoring the tearful entreaties of her brother to return home. She claimed “she had a friend who would look out for her wants, and see that she got more comforts than her brother was able to give her.” Gordon escaped a third time from the Mission in 1881 and presented herself at the station house, demanding the police fetch her trunk from the reformatory. When the police refused she replied, “If you send me back I swear to kill myself.” She claimed to have poison secreted away in her possessions and would have her freedom one way or another.<sup>68</sup>

Addie Arlington, placed in the Mission by madam Pauline Livingston, left the Mission after her nineteenth birthday. She returned to Washington, D.C. for a short time, but again embraced sex work as a means of survival. Livingston, distraught that her adopted daughter had returned to a life of shame, disinherited Arlington and died a short time afterward. Within a year of leaving the Mission, a despondent Arlington ingested rat poison and died.<sup>69</sup>

Morphine addiction appears to have been a significant factor in recidivism and perhaps why many sex workers ultimately left the Mission. Belle Pickett, a morphine addict who may have been a prostitute, was committed to the Mission by her brother. Despite being closely

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<sup>67</sup> *Appeal*, June 18, 1879, June 30, 1888.

<sup>68</sup> *Ledger.*, August 28, 1880, January 24, 1881.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, September 1, 1886.

watched by the matron, Pickett died in the spring of 1888 after consuming a vial of morphine she had hidden in her trunk. When sex worker Nellie Johnson left the Mission she immediately ordered a hack driver to take her to a drug store, where she purchased a bottle of morphine. After some time passed the driver found her in a stupor on the street and immediately took her to the police. The Mission lacked the resources and strategies for dealing with addiction, which was not out of the ordinary for such reformatories. Even organizations which specialized in treating addiction offered suspect “cures.” The famous Keeley Institute, which opened a branch in Memphis, offered a “cure” for addiction that may have included strychnine, opium, and morphine. Furthermore, society saw the consumption of opiates as less physically and socially harmful than alcohol. When the women of the WCA launched a crusade against substance abuse in the 1870s, they had plenty to say about the evils of tobacco and alcohol, but not morphine addiction.<sup>70</sup>

The public associated Morphine consumption with suicide. Nine times out of ten, when prostitutes ended their lives, it resulted from an overdose of morphine. The efforts of the Mission may have slightly reduced the number of overdoses and suicides among members of the fallen sisterhood in the city. Between the beginning of the Civil War and the establishment of the Mission, there were sixteen documented cases of suicide, attempted suicide, and overdose. Between 1876 and 1890, twelve instances of suicide and overdose have been documented. The recidivism of prostitutes constituted a medical problem, not one of simply encouraging industry and self-control. In this era, however, addiction remained a little-understood facet of psychology.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *Appeal*, April 18, 1876, April 22, 1888; *Ledger*, January 24, 1882; Jack S. Blocker, David M. Fahey, Ian Tyrrell, eds. *Alcohol and Temperance in Modern History: A Global Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003), 346.

<sup>71</sup> These numbers are taken from newspaper articles in the *Appeal*, *Ledger*, and *Avalanche* between 1857 and 1890.

Escapes from the Mission, whether from a strong craving for morphine, or a desire to simply return to the fast life, prompted the matron and her assistants to be particularly vigilant about keeping the Home locked up. A reporter from the *Ledger*, while visiting the Mission, noted that whenever the tour led out of an outside door the matron “carefully locked” it behind them. In addition, the matron bolted the windows on the ground level to prevent them from being opened. In a further move to prevent escapes, the staff secluded adult inmates on the third floor. While on his tour, the reporter from the *Ledger* spied “a young woman standing at a window, “gazing sadly out.” When the reporter asked, with a hint of sarcasm, if the Mission always seemed so “quiet and homelike” the matron replied: “As a rule, it is always as you see it now. Occasionally some of the girls disagree, but the discipline is so strict that quiet is soon restored.” The matron kept a police whistle in case things became particularly disorderly.<sup>72</sup>

The Mission presented inmates with a highly regimented life. Working from the belief that idle hands were the devil's plaything, the matron vigilantly watched inmates and kept them on task. Women who entered the Home engaged in work little different from that which female inmates performed in the County Jail and on President's Island. Inmates made rugs, engaged in sewing articles of clothing, and in the rear of the Mission stood a building where they did laundry. When not at work the matron required boarders to attend chapel. The constant work and rigid discipline of the house undoubtedly chafed some residents.<sup>73</sup>

Even though a charitable organization, its mode of operation and close ties to the metropolitan police reveal the Mission to have been an extension of the city's law enforcement. Over time the metropolitan police assumed a greater role in the operation of the Mission. The chief of police sat on an advisory committee for the Mission and at times handed over women he

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<sup>72</sup> *Ledger*, September 17, 1880.

<sup>73</sup> Hough, “The Treatment of Unwed Mothers in Tennessee,” 107, 115.

deemed in need of reform. This proved a boon to the police and the city government, as the city's jails overflowed with not only dangerous criminals, but also alcoholics, vagrants, and disorderly women. It cost the city 35 cents a day to feed each person confined to the station-house. A one hundred-day stint in the station-house for a disorderly woman, a common sentence for women who could not pay their fines, cost the city thirty-five dollars. The Mission saved the city money, but also spared police resources.<sup>74</sup>

Throughout the 1880s, the chief of police assumed an important role in determining which women would be sent to the reformatory. The WCA realized they could not just accept all women. The experience of numerous escape attempts had made this very apparent. Instead, the Mission increasingly housed those believed to still possess a spark of virtue. Determining who still possessed virtue often fell male authorities -- the police. In May of 1883, the WCA asked the chief of police to investigate a young woman from Dyersburg, Tennessee, and determined her suitability for reform. The chief, after meeting with the young woman, released her, "as it was plain she was too far sunk in the depths of infamy ever to be raised again to a respectable level." The press described the young woman, known as Mary Woods, as "young and handsome, but depraved to an extent almost impossible to conceive. She uses language obscene enough to make a cold shiver run through the most hardened sinner and has absolutely no shame." Woods had worked as a prostitute since the age of nine. The WCA accepted the chief's word and Woods remained on the street.<sup>75</sup>

In January of 1885 the police sent Nannie Keel to the reformatory. When Keel absconded from the Mission, the matron would not release her possessions. An angry Keel applied to President Hadden for an order on the Mission Home to return her trunk, claiming the matron

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<sup>74</sup> *Appeal*, February 1, 1874; *Ledger*, June 19, 1874.

<sup>75</sup> *Ledger*, May 11, 1883; Wedell, 53.

held them without justification. An investigation by the police found she had been “well cared for” but was “naturally depraved.” After the WCA returned her trunk, Keel made arrangements at once to enter a house of ill-fame on Desoto Street.<sup>76</sup>

“Natural depravity” also excluded black women from the Mission. According to the dominant racial ideology, women of color were naturally depraved. The women of the WCA believed that black nature could not be reformed. In addition, white women who crossed the color line faced exclusion from the Mission. In 1892, Lillie Bailey, a pregnant seventeen-year old girl from Hernando, Mississippi, entered the reformatory. Three months later she gave birth to a mixed-race child. When the matron and her assistants found the child to be a “little coon” they were “horrified. The matron immediately evicted Bailey and sent her to the City Hospital. Upholding dominant notions of race hampered the Association's objectives of stamping out vice and challenging the sexual double standard. The exclusion of women of color from the reformatory mirrors the wider attitude within the city of treating black prostitution as primarily a problem of race mixing, not of morality.<sup>77</sup>

Memphians, and even members of the WCA, remained ambivalent about the Mission Home for much of its existence. The grand jury of Shelby County ruled the Mission Home a nuisance and suggested relocating to an area outside the city limits where it would not harm property values. A sense of discomfort with the Mission always pervaded the WCA as well. Most of the funds donated by women to the WCA went to other fields of work. Funding always posed a problem for the Mission, and it largely continued to exist through the support of Elizabeth Johnson's husband, who also donated land for the location of the Mission Home. By the mid-1890s, the WCA began segregating sex workers and women who had entered the Mission

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<sup>76</sup> *Appeal*, February 17, 1885.

<sup>77</sup> Hough, “The Treatment of Unwed Mothers,” 114.

seeking temporary shelter. Lide Meriwether remarked that a “nameless cloud” would rest upon the virtuous women seen entering the refuge, if only for the purpose of obtaining work or seeking assistance.<sup>78</sup>

Another institution dedicated to the reform of prostitutes in Memphis operated alongside the Mission Home, albeit with a radically different approach. The Sisters of the Good Shepherd, a Roman Catholic monastic order, first arrived in Memphis in 1875. This order, dedicated to the rescue of women in difficulty, worked particularly with prostitutes and “wayward women.” Historians have had comparatively very little to say about the Sisters, whose work has been overshadowed by that of the WCA. This omission is unfortunate, since the Sisters operated a convent that performed nearly the same functions as the Mission Home, although along different lines, and with some degree of success. Memphis reformers and feminists regarded the work of the sisters with approval, despite many of them coming from Protestant backgrounds. Lide Meriwether dedicated her book, *Soundings*, to the Sisters of the Good Shepherd; she felt they had “offered themselves a living sacrifice upon the altar of womanhood.” The WCA, an agglomeration of the city's elite protestant women, operated on a non-denominational basis. The Sisters ministered largely to the city's Catholic population, although not exclusively. And unlike the Mission, the Sisters accepted black women.<sup>79</sup>

The two-story frame house of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd stood on Poplar Avenue on land donated by Michael Magevney. Well beyond the city limits, it offered a more remote location, far from the temptations and influence of the town center. In 1875, a handful of Sisters began their work with two orphans and one “penitent,” their term for a woman who had fallen from virtue. This expanded rapidly, so that by 1878 there 24 orphans and 19 penitents lived in the

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 115-117.

<sup>79</sup> Wedell, *Elite Women*, 43.



home. By 1880, the number of penitents living in the convent increased to 28.<sup>80</sup>

The order divided women within the convent into three classes based on their willingness to live a life of penance and seclusion. The first class of penitents, known as Magdalenes, wore the Carmelite habit and lived a cloistered life, one of voluntary, harsh penance. Below these came the “ordinary penitents,” women who had “led licentious lives” but who were not willing to embrace the ascetic rigors of the first class. These women took an oath to wear a “consecration habit,” for a year. When this term ended, they could either leave or vow to remain for two more years. At the end of this period they then decided to either permanently remain in the convent or return to the wider world. Women within this class often wore badges of the Sacred Heart, denoting their commitment to living a pure life. Another group of inmates who had fallen into bad associations, but as yet too young to embrace religious vows, formed the third class. The nuns kept these from bad company and gave them an education until the age of 18. Even though a Catholic institution, the nuns accepted women of all denominations.<sup>81</sup>

The convent particularly served those from Catholic backgrounds. The 1880 census reveals the vast majority of penitents as first or second generation Irish, German, or French. Although the WCA Mission operated on a non-denominational basis, its clear Protestant bent may have influenced many Catholic women and parents to avoid the institution in favor of one that professed their own faith.<sup>82</sup>

Unlike the Mission Home, the Home of the Good Shepherd did not refuse black women. In 1880, Effie Eldridge a sixteen-year old black girl, lived as an “inmate” among the penitents. Although a small act, the admission of a black girl to a reformatory for prostitutes constituted a

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<sup>80</sup> *Appeal*, November 14, 1880.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> 1880 United States Federal Census, Population Schedule, Shelby County, District 119, 41-42.

radical action in late nineteenth-century Memphis. This not only challenged racial boundaries in public worship, but also called into question the notion that black women could not be reformed. What prompted the Sisters to accept this young woman is not certain, although they may have been acting on the teaching of St. Paul that “there is neither Jew nor Greek” in Christ.<sup>83</sup>

Unlike the Mission Home, the convent had no walls and compelled no one to stay. Despite the exertion of “strenuous effort” for conversion, penitents and orphans often left of their own volition. Josie Early, a young woman who “went bad,” came to the Sisters through the agency of her parents, but due to the lack of any restraints ran away within 24 hours. Fewer notices of inmates absconding from the convent in the local papers may be an indication that their lack of compulsion proved more successful in persuading inmates to remain.<sup>84</sup>

In its broad contours, life in the House of the Good Shepherd resembled that of the Mission Home. In the morning and evening the Sister Superior required the inmates to attend chapel. Inmates received training in domestic skills such as sewing, making rugs, and operating a laundry for profit. In addition, the convent had its own orchard and bakehouse, areas which also employed the labor of penitents. Apart from industrial training, inmates received a basic education.<sup>85</sup>

The life of poverty embraced by the Sisters, and their lack of any class markers beyond those which existed within the order, may have fostered the development of closer bonds than possible in the Mission Home. The women of the WCA, no matter how well-intentioned, faced difficulties in developing equal relationships with sex workers due to their elite position.

Creating future servants for themselves and those of their class undoubtedly bred a sense of

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> *Appeal*, May 10, 1879, November 14, 1880.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

psychological distance. As largely undifferentiated women who had embraced a life of poverty, the Sisters developed strong personal ties with their charges. A visitor to the House of the Good Shepherd remarked on the “good feeling which seemed to exist between the penitents and the nuns. Love on the one side and gratitude on the other had made them equal.”<sup>86</sup>

The Home of the Good Shepherd succeeded in converting and reforming women who came to them. The Sisters did not make public the names of women who chose to remain with them as penitents, which makes gauging rates of success difficult, but some former sex workers remained in the religious order as nuns. In 1884, when asked if penitents ever reformed, the Sisters replied that there were “several, who, having entered when the house was first opened, in 1875 and 1876, are still with them, leading exemplary lives.” In the 1880 census over a dozen sisters from Mississippi, Louisiana, and Missouri may have been former prostitutes. Sister Mary Aloise, a seventeen-year old nun from Louisiana of Irish parentage, may have been a sex worker who embraced a life of asceticism and prayer.<sup>87</sup>

Just as with the Mission Home, a number of cases of recidivism underscored the difficulties of dealing with addiction and the excitement of the fast life. The routines of work and chapel bothered young women used to the freedom of the streets. This, coupled with drug addiction, impelled young women to leave. Bettie Doyle, who lived with the Sisters in the mid-1870s, left the home after an unknown period of time and returned to her “dissolute habits.” She later died of a morphine overdose in 1877. Josie Early, who escaped from the Sisters in 1878, began living at 32 Hernando Street, a well-known brothel. She preferred a life of raucous carriage rides with fast young men to a secluded existence of discipline and penance.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> *Appeal*, November 17, 1880.

<sup>87</sup> 1880 United States Federal Census, Population Schedule, Shelby County, District 119, 41-42; *Appeal*, February 24, 1884.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, March 13, 1877, May 10, 1879.

Not all women who “reformed” left prostitution through the assistance of organizations such as the WCA or the Sisters of the Good Shepherd. The clearest and most dramatic example of a sex worker repudiating her former life and working for the reform of other prostitutes is that of Rosalie Brockley (nee Pavid), who went by the working names of Louisa Morris or “French Lou.” Brockley had no known connection to the operation of the WCA or the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, but by the end of her life, she became the matron of a similar establishment in Augusta, Georgia. Brockley had undoubtedly been one of the most hardened madams in the city during the Civil War era. Her first brothel, located on Calhoun Street, stood in a rough, working-class neighborhood, patronized by violent, drunken railroad employees and steamboat men. Probably an abuser of alcohol herself, she often beat her servants. In 1858 Brockley narrowly escaped death at the hands of Eliza Milliner, a jealous fellow prostitute. During the Civil War, brothel bullies broke into her house on Gayoso Street and destroyed her furniture. Throughout all of this she remained in business, clinging tenaciously to the niche she had carved for herself in the rough river town. Just prior to or during the Civil War she married a young Englishman, Robert Brockley, and bore him a child. After only a year or two of marriage, her husband died.<sup>89</sup>

In the late 1860s, Pavid, now going by the name of her late husband, Brockley, left Memphis and moved to Mississippi, where for a time she raised her daughter Elizabeth. What made Brockley give up her career as a madam is unknown, but she may have judged it too dangerous for her daughter. She then moved to Augusta, Georgia, and worked in textile mills throughout the 1880s. By the 1890s, and now in her 70s, Brockley became involved in the Christian Union Mission, an organization established by the women of Augusta for the rescue of “fallen women.” As a former madam, she had experience in managing groups of wayward young

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<sup>89</sup> *Appeal*, September 15, 1858, January 23, 1862; Many of the details regarding Rosalie Brockley's life after the middle of the 1860s were provided by Hattie Wilcox, her great x3 granddaughter.

women. Her former life uniquely equipped her to minister to those leaving prostitution. She worked as a matron of the Mission throughout the 1890s and early twentieth century, offering what assistance she could to a class of women she had formerly called her “boarders” or her “girls.” The shift from madam and procuress to matron and nurse came easily. She pursued this line of work until her death in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>90</sup>

The efforts of reformers in rescuing and redeeming women from sex work were fraught with difficulty. Foremost among these, the belief that all prostitutes wanted to be rescued and redeemed. By perpetuating the notion of victimhood, reformers hamstrung their efforts to stamp out prostitution. By running their reformatory like a prison, elite reformers alienated prostitutes who only wanted to be left alone to make a living or to experience the freedom of a fast life. Increasingly, the women of the WCA turned to male authority figures, particularly the police, as arbiters of which women they should accept. The WCA effectively became an adjunct of Memphis law enforcement by the middle of the 1880s. The Mission Home also ignored black women, evincing greater interest in maintaining the color line. The WCA and the Sisters of the Good Shepherd also failed to effectively address substance abuse and its role in keeping women in prostitution. Finally, by failing to grasp that race, gender, and class worked together to maintain the status quo, the WCA fatally undermined their own work.

### **“We have to stick to each other in death as well as life:” Prostitutes' Relationships**

Contemporary assessments of prostitutes' relationships fall into two distinct stereotypes: a

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<sup>90</sup> 1900 United States Federal Census, Population Schedule, Richmond, Augusta, Georgia, 5.

“negative” image that characterized prostitutes' associations as being dominated by jealousy, hatred and rivalry, and a “sympathetic-idealized” image which depicted prostitutes as bonding over their opposition to men and respectable society. Historians continue to debate whether prostitutes developed long-term, fulfilling relationships with each other and family members. Many historians, such as Anne M. Butler and Judith Kelleher Schafer, argue that prostitutes' relationships with each other centered on competition and violence. The cutthroat world of commercial sex did not promote the development of friendships. In an industry that “capitalized on their ignorance,” Butler argues, “each woman focused only on her own interests in a career with a limited future.” Similarly, the instability of prostitutes' lives also impinged on their relationships with family members, leading to the neglect of children and the failure of marriages. In contrast, Marilyn Wood Hill argues that while violence among prostitutes did exist, some structural aspects of prostitution -- notably living and working together -- did facilitate close female friendships. In her examination of New York prostitutes, Hill found prostitutes sharing leisure activities, corresponding with one another, visiting, giving gifts, and caring for one another. Hill argues that at a minimum this indicates that some prostitutes did form cooperative relationships and at best these may have developed into intimate relationships of genuine affection.<sup>91</sup>

The evidence from Memphis indicates that prostitutes did indeed develop friendships with their fellow sex workers. Prostitutes gathered to sew, attend the theater, and go on picnics. When one of their number grew ill, prostitutes and madams offered some measure of aid to the ailing. The competition that existed between prostitutes has been overstated. Sex workers more often fought over the theft of a lover than for mercenary reasons. Competition did exist,

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<sup>91</sup> Marilyn Wood Hill, *Their Sisters' Keepers*, 293; Anne M. Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery*, 45; Judith Kelleher Schafer, *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women*, 73.

however, and a significant number of fights found in the newspapers and in the court dockets likely arose out of professional animosities. Newspaper and court records overemphasize the violent aspects of the relationships between sex workers. This violence emerged out of both the stress of working in prostitution and personal animosities.

A certain level of competition did exist among madams, but madams also cooperated in business ventures. Whatever competition which may have existed among madams did not necessarily rise to the level of hostility. Madams developed feuds, but they appear less common than those which existed among sex workers. Madams exploited prostitutes, but a close reading of the sources indicates that madams sought to protect and care for their boarders, certainly out of economic concerns, but also out of personal concern for their well-being. The idealized image of prostitutes as bound together by their opposition to abusive customers and their separation from other women is inaccurate. In addition, the negative image of prostitutes as stripped of all tenderness and compassion is not supported by evidence.

A popular notion held that prostitutes had a natural hatred of men born out of male violence and sexual exploitation. This is not borne out by the sources. Many prostitute-client relationships indeed involved hostility and violence, but most encounters between men and prostitutes were brief and impersonal. Some men did seek out emotional connections with prostitutes, but most customers sought brief sexual contacts only. Long-term relationships between men and prostitutes included casual friendships, business partnerships, and intimate unions. Long term romantic involvements between men and prostitutes often ended badly, resulting in the suicide of jilted lovers. Evidence suggests that romantic relationships could be dysfunctional, exploitative, and violent. But other evidence hints at the existence mutually beneficial and caring relationships. As in relationships with other prostitutes, economic

considerations often shaped their relationships with men. Lovers could be landlords or customers; a deputy sheriff could be a customer and a protector; a male friend might provide his services as a procurer.

Memphis newspapers are replete with accounts of violence among prostitutes. Violence emerged out of competition, the stress of working in the sex trade, and the consumption of large amounts of mind-altering substances. It is important to note, however, that violence among prostitutes occurred no more frequently than among other members of the working class. Memphis had a justified reputation for being a violent city. The Gallatin, Tennessee *Examiner* estimated that “Bloody Memphis” averaged about six murders a week. Scott Holzer, in his study on Memphis working class life, argues that “men walked through Memphis only a hair trigger away from a violent explosion.” A perceived slight at a saloon or on the street, a challenge -- real or imagined -- to one's honor, demanded savage reprisal. Stories of Memphis violence frightened country people and limited the length of visits to the Bluff City. This fierce character arose out of the city's rapid urbanization, its diverse, largely male population, and what Bertram Wyatt-Brown refers to as primal honor. The diverse group of people who gathered in Memphis shared common notions regarding self-worth. Public status through honor was conferred upon an individual by a group. Primal honor placed importance on personal valor and ferocity in the defense of one's name and reputation. This view stood in contrast to the modern middle class view, which granted status and esteem through individual merit and self-control.<sup>92</sup>

Although largely the preserve of men, prostitutes also embraced a sense of honor. Sex workers defended their status within the community of prostitutes and the larger sporting world. Rather than simply an indication of disordered, dysfunctional lives, prostitutes embraced

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<sup>92</sup> Scott Holzer, *Brawling on the Bluff*, 184-185, 187-190; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), xv-xix.



violence as a means of protecting their reputations and their business. The brawls between sex workers, rather than the meaningless scuffles the newspapers believed them to be, arose out of a desire to establish and defend territory and position within the sex trade. Newspaper articles promoted the notion that prostitutes fought largely out of drunkenness and their unruly nature. Although fights did arise out of drunkenness, most violence between prostitutes arose out of defending territory, laying claim to male admirers, and asserting one's place in the sex trade's hierarchy. A prostitute who would not employ violence might find herself losing her position as a kept mistress, forced out of a parlor house, penniless, or even dead. The most successful madams and prostitutes stood ready to use force. Prostitutes frequently armed themselves and prepared to launch a ferocious assault should the need arise. Sights or challenges from other prostitutes met with swift reprisal, and in some instances resulted in challenges to arranged fights.

In March of 1861, two “unsexed women” who plied their trade at the “Free and Easy” saloon on Jefferson Street, arranged to settle a dispute in a “feminine prize fight” at Jackson Mound. At that time Jackson Mound, a collection of pre-Columbian earthen mounds, stood outside the city limits and served as a gathering and recreational space for city residents. Several men accompanied the women to the fight, and the press described the spectacle as “brutally disgusting.” The following week a large number of “fast young men,” drove by hack to Jackson Mound to witness “two notorious courtesans” – Jane Reedy and Mary Williams – engaging in a “pitched battle.” The press referred to these women as “unsexed,” not only because of their profession, but for engaging in the male pursuit of displaying physical prowess in combat.<sup>93</sup>

Newspaper accounts emphasized the chaotic and violent relationships between prostitutes, but a closer reading of newspaper sources and court testimony reveals sex workers

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<sup>93</sup> *Avalanche*, March 18, 1861; *Argus*, March 27, 1861. The frequency of boxing among prostitutes during this period is a subject which requires more research.

developed friendships, socialized, and supported one another. These interactions could be simple quotidian activities during periods between visits by customers. Pamela Brown passed the time with other boarders in Nannie McGinnis's house of ill-fame by telling their fortunes with tarot cards. Hattie Rodgers visited her friend, another sex worker known only as “Miss Smith,” to socialize and do embroidery. Ada Jones and Lou Smith, who boarded together at 40 Washington Street, drank together and went out on the town to eat and carouse. Smith recalled Jones rushing her out the door for a stroll on the town, “Lou, hurry up, and let us go out and have some fun; we ain't got always to live, no how.”<sup>94</sup>

Sex workers also socialized at picnics and balls organized exclusively for the women of parlor houses and their clientele. This proved necessary, as sex workers often faced exclusion from public picnics and other social functions. A notice for a concert at Estival Park in 1877 warned “improper characters” attempting to enter the grounds would be “repulsed, and even those of that class who attempt to enter under the cloak or guise of semi-respectability, because they have a male escort, will be prevented. We refer to a class known as 'kept women.’” In 1883, a “tipsy picnicker” at Estival Park left his wife and sat down next to the picnicking Madam Pauline Livingstone and her associates. An annoyed wife informed a police officer and asked him to remove Livingstone from the grounds. The officer demurred on the grounds that Livingstone had broken no law. Angry park-strollers eventually forced an “indignant” Livingstone to leave.<sup>95</sup>

Prostitutes picnicking alone could be pushed out of public spaces by Memphians, but arranged events featuring dozens of prostitutes and their “friends” escaped molestation. The Memphis Trotting Park Garden, the site of horse races, became the regular location for

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<sup>94</sup> *Appeal*, December 13, 1861, July 15, 1871.

<sup>95</sup> *Ledger*, July 13, 1877; *Appeal*, July 14, 1883.

demimonde picnics and social gatherings. A Trotting Park picnic in August of 1867 drew forty couples from among the demimonde and sporting men. Balls organized for the denizens of Memphis parlor houses on an invitation only basis served as sites of socialization for prostitutes. Madams, saloon keepers, or other promoters organized these events and distributed invitations to “fast young men,” and other members of the sporting fraternity. These events enabled higher class prostitutes to mingle with others of their class, as well as potentially attract new customers. New Year's Eve Balls in particular became notable as gatherings for the city's courtesans. The 1878 New Year's ball, held at the Memphis Exposition building, attracted “almost exclusively” members of the demimonde, who dressed in “expensive costumes” and “mask and domino.” The party lasted past three o'clock in the morning and featured can-can dancing. For prostitutes, social activities typically overlapped with business pursuits. Gathering at the beer-gardens that dotted Memphis to sip lager beer, attending balls, or riding out in a hack or barouche united both business and pleasure.<sup>96</sup>

A wedding party in the world of high class prostitution became an occasion for lavish celebration and underscores the friendships that existed among sex workers. In July of 1875, a member of the demimonde married one of her admirers. The wedding party met at a nearby “beer caravansary,” where members of the “monde” gave toasts to the health and prosperity of the newlyweds. A leading madam then invited the party to an “up-town *maison de joie*” where a lavish feast and ball had been planned for the couple. The party lasted to a “very late hour,” when the “nymphs” of the establishment “wished them a long life and a prosperous one.”<sup>97</sup>

The relationships between sex workers may have also been characterized by emotions beyond friendship. The question of whether lesbian relationships existed between Memphis

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<sup>96</sup> *Ledger*, August 21, 1868; *Appeal*, January 21, 1878.

<sup>97</sup> *Ledger*, July 15, 1875.

prostitutes is difficult to answer. Very little evidence exists of homosexual relationships between women, and what little exists only hints at the existence of such relationships. Nannie McGinnis devoted considerable attention and care to her boarder Hattie Rodgers, who fell ill in December of 1861. McGinnis shared a bed with Rodgers, who slept with her arm draped over McGinnis possessively. This may have been a measure intended to preserve body heat, or it may be an indication of intimacy between this particular madam and boarder. Even if prostitutes slept together simply to keep warm, it created a level of intimacy that would tend to promote close relationships.<sup>98</sup>

In March of 1861, the police found Alice Jones, Margaret Williams and Louisa Nellis in bed together with John Brown and Wesley Wail. The officer considered the situation “too thick,” and had the group arrested. Whether this indicates the women in question engaged in same-sex sexual acts is impossible to determine. Neither Memphis nor Tennessee law criminalized lesbianism, but laws did prohibit women from dressing in men's apparel. Authorities put this law in place to police sexual boundaries and to prevent prostitutes from infiltrating male space for the purposes of soliciting customers. Authorities arrested at least one woman, Mollie Daniels, for wearing men's apparel in Memphis. This arrest occurred in July of 1862 and Daniels may have been a camp follower or prostitute who plied her trade among soldiers. Madam Nell Kimball suggests that madams did not tolerate lesbians among their girls. “Girls that become libertines with each other,” she wrote in her memoirs, “don't satisfy the johns they are involved with themselves.” Marion Goldman has found in her research into western prostitutes that the question of whether lesbian relationships existed among prostitutes is unanswerable. Goldman argues that twentieth century conceptions of human relationships divide friendship and love into

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<sup>98</sup> *Appeal*, December 13, 1861.

two distinct categories. This view tends to distort the emotional relationships that existed between prostitutes in the nineteenth century. Ultimately, those relationships remained private matters for the friends who shared them.<sup>99</sup>

An examination of census records reveals that at least some sex workers may have literally been sisters or adopted common surnames. The Hayden sisters, Margaret and Kate, operated brothels near to each other on the southern outskirts of the city. Lizzie and Jennie Wheters both hailed from Tennessee and worked in a Fifth Ward whorehouse. Twenty-four and twenty-seven respectively, the two may have been sisters or possibly cousins. Anna and Frances Davenport, twenty-six and seventeen, hailed from New York and worked in separate Fifth Ward brothels. In 1867, Frank (Frances) and Sarah Meade worked in Jennie Collins's Brothel.<sup>100</sup>

Friendships can also be glimpsed in the adoption of working names by sex workers. Some women may have chosen to adopt common last names as a means of concealing their identity and forming bonds with other sex workers. Prostitution often meant a complete severing of blood ties and women may have sought to forge new ties of kinship with other sex workers. Four women who lived in the Louisa Morris brothel in 1860 went by the surname Brown, although all hailed from widely divergent places, including Indiana, New York, Virginia and France. Madeleine Blair records that the selection of a working name for a new prostitute became a communal activity within the brothel. A group of boarders decided upon a particular name because they considered it to be “lucky.” In shedding their old identity and taking on an assumed name, these women may have cemented ties of friendship through bonds of fictive

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<sup>99</sup> *Avalanche*, March 22, 1861; Memphis Police Blotter, July 26, 1862, SCA; Hill, *Their Sisters' Keepers*, 306-308; Goldman, *Gold Diggers and Silver Miners*, 121; Kimball, 4. For more on same-sex relationships in Memphis, see Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>100</sup> 1860 United States Federal Census, Population Schedule, Fifth Ward, Memphis, Shelby County Tennessee, 53, 76; Memphis Recorder's Docket, January 1, 1867.

kinship.<sup>101</sup>

There is some evidence to suggest prostitutes thought of each other as family. Pauline Livingstone “informally adopted” Addie Arlington and made her a beneficiary of her will. Livingstone also sent Arlington to the Memphis home for “fallen women” in an attempt to get her to leave prostitution. When Arlington left the reform home and returned to a life of prostitution, a disappointed Livingstone wrote Arlington out of her will. The falling out over Arlington's failure to “reform” may have been a contribution to Livingstone's death from a heart condition at the age of thirty-seven. Months after Livingstone died, Arlington took her own life, perhaps in part out of regret over having driven her adoptive mother to her grave.<sup>102</sup>

Other madams developed close relationships with their boarders. Madams took care of prostitutes, either through preventing them from taking their own lives, defending them from attack by customers, or handling the arrangements of their burial. Madams may have simply sought to keep their boarders healthy and alive so as to extract money from them, but evidence suggests the existence of a level of concern beyond mere economic calculations.

When Annie Gallagher learned that Laura Whitfield, one of her boarders, intended to swallow an overdose of morphine, she “dashed the glass from her hands.” Gallagher's attempt to save Whitfield's life failed, however. Gallagher's motivation in attempting to prevent Whitfield's suicide is unknown. She may have simply been attempting to preserve a source of income and avoid paying burial costs. Other madams clearly evinced concern for the well-being of their boarders. Camille Carl, who took laudanum “for every little trouble or complaint,” took enough of the drug to fall into a state of delirium on February 23, 1875. Hearing Carl complain of pain in

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<sup>101</sup> 1860 United States Federal Census, Sixth Ward, Memphis, Shelby County, 156; Madeleine Rondeaux, *Madeleine: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1909), 62.

<sup>102</sup> *Appeal*, September 1, 1886; Pauline Barclay (Livingston) probate record, 1880-05444, SCA

her chest and side and thinking she suffered from an attack of pneumonia, Madam Susan Powell sent her servant to purchase a bottle of chloroform liniment to bring her relief. The servant placed the liniment on Carl's bedside table, which Carl mistakenly assumed to be laudanum. Carl swallowed the entire contents of the bottle without reading the label, which shortly caused her agonizing pain. The poison quickly began to work and Powell summoned a physician, who claimed he could do nothing. Powell then secured the services of a Catholic priest, who ministered to Carl as she died, "with her countenance expressing a calm composure." Deeply affected by her death, Powell paid for a lavish funeral, purchasing a burial shroud of merino wool, silk cord, white kid gloves, silk slippers, adorning her head with a wreath of orange blossoms, and furnishing an "elegant" metallic casket. Such actions suggest the existence of an emotional connection between Powell and Carl.<sup>103</sup>

In other instances, madams sought to protect their boarders from violent male customers. When a john named William Backrow became violent with seventeen-year old Blanche Moore, she called for Madam Blanche Curry stop him. Curry rushed to her room, but was powerless to stop Backrow as he punched Moore in the face and kicked her in the abdomen and side. Curry summoned a doctor for Moore and watched over her while she convalesced from her wounds. Madams also employed violence to protect boarders from clients they deemed dangerous. Nannie McGinnis, a madam who operated a concern on Main Street, advised prostitute Nettie Myers "not to have anything to do with" a man named Edward Scanlon, who kept a saloon at the corner of Exchange and Main. McGinnis' prohibition likely stemmed from her belief that Scanlon posed a danger to his boarders. When Scanlon learned of this he began "cursing and abusing" McGinnis. The madam produced a pistol from her bureau and demanded Scanlon leave

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<sup>103</sup> *Avalanche*, December 8, 1870; *Appeal*, February 23, 24, 1875

her house. A scuffle ensued; Scanlon seized the pistol and attempted to retreat from the house, but an unknown party shot him below his right eye, killing him instantly. Nannie McGinnis denied responsibility for the killing and all witnesses inside the house substantiated the claim.<sup>104</sup>

The friendships and ties of affection between prostitutes are most evident in instances when one of them died. Prostitute Belle Ford recounted to an *Appeal* reporter while “crying pitifully” how Lizzie Smith, her friend and housemate, had committed suicide. The two had grown up together in Dayton, Ohio, and reunited in a brothel in Memphis. Ford remarked that Smith “was the most popular girl in the house and very much liked by all her companions.” Many women experienced losing a friend to suicide, murder, or disease. The death of a friend or fellow member of the “frail sisterhood” brought the common challenges faced by sex workers into clearer focus and made them reflect on their collective plight. Just days before her own death, Camille Carl became “greatly affected” by the death of madam Lou Fisher. While leaving Fisher's funeral at Elmwood she asked, “Well, I wonder who will go next?”<sup>105</sup>

Another indication of the close ties which existed between prostitutes is seen in the collective concern they had for granting one of their number a proper burial. Sex workers typically took up collections among the brothels in town to pay for burials in Elmwood Cemetery. When Pauline Markham ended her life, a number of sex workers went around to other brothels and solicited funds for her interment. The women “subscribed liberally,” enough to cover the cost of burial, as well as a hearse and a “nice coffin.” On the way to the cemetery “four carriages containing her female friends” followed Markham's hearse. The death of nineteen-year old Nellie Melrose also inspired a collection of funds from among Memphis prostitutes to pay for her burial. Madam Nellie Steele, the operator of the brothel in which Melrose worked,

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<sup>104</sup> *Appeal*, February 19, 1884, May 24, 1869.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, May 30, 1884, February 24, 1875.



purchased a metallic casket for Melrose, and commented to an *Appeal* reporter that “we have to stick to each other in death as well as life. If a girl dies at my house I think it is my duty to bury her. This is all any person can do for the dead.” The body of Jennie Snow, who committed suicide in December of 1874, was “neatly shrouded” by some of her fellow inmates and given burial. Even Annie Gallagher, one of the most notoriously cruel madams in the city, provided for the cost of burial for Laura Whitfield, who committed suicide in December of 1870. At least one madam did not view it as her responsibility to care for or see to the burial of one of her boarders. “Big Mary,” who kept one of the lowest establishments in the city on Gayoso Street, surreptitiously abandoned one of her sick boarders outside the gate of the City Hospital late at night. “Big Mary” allegedly feared the consequences of the young woman's death on her premises, including the cost of care and burial.<sup>106</sup>

As the incident with “Big Mary” suggests, the relationships between madams and prostitutes often hinged on money. That hostility between prostitutes and madams existed is amply demonstrated in newspaper and court records. But these interactions were not uncomplicated tales of rapacious madams and victimized prostitutes. Prostitutes often behaved just as aggressively and hard-boiled as brothel keepers. Madams worked to maximize the funds they could extract from their boarders, while prostitutes sought to exercise their independence. Mobility was one of the chief characteristics of prostitutes at this time. Rootlessness stood at the core of the prostitute's existence; she could pack up her meager possessions and move to another brothel or town if she could not pay her rent or had a falling out with the proprietor. Madams sought to limit this mobility however they could. When Willie D. Bow and Clara Montgomery attempted to leave Sarah Flynn's Main Street brothel, Flynn stole the trunks containing all of

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<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, August 19, 1880, June 3, December 15, 1874; *Avalanche*, August 20, 1860.

their possessions as a means to prevent them from leaving. In another instance, Annie Gallagher seized the child of a prostitute who had left town and held her in lieu of unpaid debts. The attention of the police convinced Gallagher to reluctantly release the child to her mother. Such instances underscore the daily struggles between madams and sex workers. In other instances, prostitutes turned the tables on brothel proprietors. Madam Puss Pettus suspected Louisa Fisher of stealing \$350 from her after Fisher reportedly made statements to other boarders that she now came “\$350 ahead of the old cow.” Pettus charged Fisher with theft, but the court eventually dismissed the case.<sup>107</sup>

Animosities between prostitutes and brothel keepers spilled into the streets and shaped the geography of the sex trade. Prostitutes who left a brothel on Center Alley and joined another nearby hurled insults at the “female boss” of their former house, for which she brought them to court. Some Madams also consciously sought to separate themselves and their families from the women they boarded. Nettie White resented the attentions one of her boarders, Mattie Williams, gave to her fifteen-year-old son. White claimed that Williams had become “too intimate” with him, and for this offense White assaulted Williams on Poplar Street, inflicting “divers and sundry wounds” on her face with a “heavy diamond ring.”<sup>108</sup>

Violence between madams proved less common than among prostitutes, but they developed their own feuds which provided ample fodder for the local papers. Annie Gallagher, probably the most notorious madam in Memphis between 1865 and the mid-1870s, became the frequent subject of such newspaper coverage. In 1868, a prosecuting attorney summoned Gallagher and Margaret Van Wert, who kept a brothel near the Old Memphis Theater, to his office to offer testimony in a prostitution case. Evidently rivals, the women commenced hurling

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<sup>107</sup> *Appeal*, June 11, July 18, 1872; Brock, “Memphis's Nymphs Du Pave,” 62.

<sup>108</sup> *Appeal*, April 6, 1878; *Ledger*, May 1, 1880.

epithets at each other. Van Wert described Gallagher as “a regular old pizen [poison] – mighty nice.” After a scuffle in which Van Wert tore out a handful of Gallagher's hair, the police escorted Van Wert to jail. In August of 1873, Gallagher and Cora White became involved in a dispute. The cause of their disagreement is unknown, but it became serious enough for Gallagher to attempt to kidnap White from her Commerce Street establishment, “a locality inhabited promiscuously by both black and white persons.” Gallagher and her hack driver ambushed White outside the house and attempted to force her into a carriage. Gallagher produced a dirk knife and threatened to “perforate” her if she did not come along peaceably. White's screams attracted a crowd, which put an end to Gallagher's attack. The *Appeal* gave the encounter coverage for two days, derisively referring to the women as “very naughty girls.”<sup>109</sup>

Relationships with men could be more volatile than those which existed among prostitutes. women more often suffered violence at the hands of customers than other sex workers, particularly the women who worked in lower class brothels and had less control over the customers they serviced. Little prevented intoxicated customers from savagely beating prostitutes or killing them. Rowdy men fired their pistols blindly into brothels out of anger and frustration at being refused admittance. In addition, since brothels served as social gathering places for men, they also became places where men fought and killed each other.

This violence frequently sprang out of jealousy and rivalry for the attentions of a courtesan. In the summer of 1866 a steamboat engineer named Michael Rogan confronted his similarly-named rival Michael Reagan, an off-duty policeman, outside of Mollie Fisher's Gayoso Street brothel. Angry over the attention Reagan had lavished on Mollie Glenn, his “kept woman,” Rogan vowed violence. Rogan found Reagan sitting in a carriage with the object of

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<sup>109</sup> *Appeal*, August 19, 1868, August 6, 7, 1873.

their mutual affection. Reagan struck first, hitting his rival over a head with a cane. Rogan responded by firing four shots into Reagan with a revolver, wounding him in the thigh and abdomen. Although seriously wounded, Reagan produced his own pistol and returned fire, killing Rogan with a slug to the chest. Mollie Glenn refused to testify in the case, resulting in her imprisonment for contempt.<sup>110</sup>

But most customers behaved peaceably. Timothy Gilfoyle, in his research on New York, found brothel patronage extremely common among all social classes, including among married men. Gilfoyle argues that sex with prostitutes became customary for the majority of men – not just transients or lower class men – but also for middle and upper class men. Gilfoyle suggests this developed because of the growing anonymity and freedom of the city, an increasing inability of lower class men to afford marriage, and male resentment of the growing power of women within marriage. In addition, men sought out their own social spaces where they might engage in the masculine pursuits of drinking, gambling, and carousing. That elite men frequented Memphis brothels is beyond doubt. Daisy Neely Mallory, the youngest daughter of cotton factor J. Columbus Neely, recalled prostitutes addressing wealthy male friends and associates on the street by name, indicating they knew each other well.<sup>111</sup>

Many prostitutes sought an arrangement by which they would be the kept woman of a particular man. Women found this arrangement more agreeable than servicing multiple clients a day. It not only meant less work, but often more money, gifts, and more meaningful companionship. Wealthier men provided better lodgings, finer clothes, and introduced mistresses into elite social circles. The majority of kept women, however, did not have admirers of means

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<sup>110</sup> *Ledger*, June 18, 1866

<sup>111</sup> Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 102-103; Daisy Neely Mallory, “Aunt Daisy Stories,” oral history collected by Neely Grant (undated), Mallory-Neely House Collection, Memphis, TN.

and continued to room in houses of ill-fame. These relationships seldom ended well. As the story of Mollie Glenn indicates, “kept women” often maintained several admirers unaware of one another, a situation which could result in death for rivals and mistresses. Ada Jones, the kept mistress of Van Roberts, lived in the brothel of Annie Melrose. In 1871, Roberts invited Jones out to eat at an oyster saloon. A dispute between the two of them resulted in Roberts shooting Jones with a derringer pistol in a private room above the saloon. When Roberts returned to Annie Melrose's house, the madam asked what had become of Jones. “Me and her have quit,” came the reply. A waiter found the body of Jones the next day on a balcony. Van Roberts' jealousy of Jones's attentions caused their falling out.<sup>112</sup>

Though not always violent, relationships between prostitutes and men often took an exploitative course. Many sex workers had lovers or male friends known as pimps who lived off the proceeds of their work. Prostitutes received deeper male companionship than found in daily mechanical sexual encounters in these relationships. These men often gambled or loafed and had a penchant for alcohol or morphine. They lived about in brothels and spent much of their day in gambling halls and saloons. When their paramours faced arrest and imprisonment in the station house, these pimps came and put up bail. In addition, pimps bought gifts for sex workers and took them out on the town. Even madams had such hangers-on. Ed Smith, the paramour of madam Annie Gallagher, associated with gamblers, sharpers, and other members of the “ghostly fraternity.” He mooched off Gallagher and acted as her enforcer, procurer, and general problem solver. When Smith and Gallagher had a falling out, Smith took a vial of morphine with a glass of ale and intended to die. The arrival of aid saved Smith's life and Gallagher once again embraced him.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> *Appeal*, July 12, 14, 15, 19, 20, 1871.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, April 14, 1871

Smith's attempted suicide indicates the strong emotions that could exist in these relationships, however exploitative they may have been. When prostitutes committed or attempted suicide, it often occurred because of the loss of a male companion. Lee Hall committed suicide when her lover, Clinton Clinck, deserted her for another woman. Clinck, learning of Hall's death, became despondent and also committed suicide from a morphine overdose. The son of a prominent fire captain and a middle-aged married man, Clinck's suicide shocked many in the city.<sup>114</sup>

Marriages occurred frequently in the demimonde, but they seldom lasted long. Fannie Freeman, who operated a brothel on Market Square in the mid-1870s, married a tonsorial artist named William Conrad. The marriage appears to have begun as a ploy on the part of Conrad to make off with Freeman's money, for shortly after the marriage Conrad disappeared from Memphis. Conrad returned, however, and promised to turn over a new leaf. For a time, the couple allegedly ran their home in a "virtuous manner," making repeated petitions to the metropolitan police to close the brothels that stood next door to them. The police ignored these petitions and Freeman again converted her house into a brothel. Mr. Conrad returned to his old mode of behavior and Fannie sought a divorce. Marriage held out the promise of respectability for sex workers, but it seldom delivered.<sup>115</sup>

### **Health and Motherhood**

A wealth of coroner records, newspaper accounts, receipts and archaeological evidence enable us to come to some conclusions about the health of prostitutes. This evidence contrasts

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<sup>114</sup> *Ledger*, May 17, 1875

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, June 8, 1877; See also accounts of Annie Gallagher's marriage, *Appeal*, July 17, 1869, April 4, 1871.

sharply with the extravagant clothing and richly furnished interiors of brothel parlors. Prostitutes suffered from poor health. When not servicing customers, prostitutes self-medicated to ward off the effects of infectious disease and to escape from the reality of their lives. Like other Memphis residents, prostitutes suffered from the same infections borne by mosquitoes, poor sanitation and bad water. Due to where prostitutes worked in the city, near the bayou or flooded areas such as “Happy Hollow,” they faced higher exposure to mosquito- and parasite-borne diseases.

Prostitutes also ate rich diets and consumed large amounts of alcohol, a factor which contributed to obesity and related ailments such as heart disease. Venereal disease plagued Memphis prostitutes as well; at least one quarter of the city's public women suffered from some sexually transmitted infection.

Drug and alcohol addiction constitute another important factor that influenced the health of prostitutes. Sex workers turned to opiates in order to numb themselves to the rigors of servicing multiple clients in a day. Laudanum also offered an escape from social isolation, violence, and suffering from the effects of disease. As a result of the harsh, socially isolating nature of sex work, as well as addiction to opiates, many prostitutes overdosed or committed suicide.

Memphis had the highest mortality rate in the nation in the early 1870s, in part because the city lacked sewers and regular garbage disposal, but also because of its proximity to stagnant bodies of water that bred mosquitoes. The Bayou Gayoso, which formed the eastern boundary of town, bred clouds of mosquitoes. Many brothels overlooked the bayou, and as a consequence prostitutes may have suffered greater exposure to mosquito-borne disease. The presence of mosquito netting in most brothels by the late nineteenth century indicates that swarms of the insects had to be prevented from attacking prostitutes and customers. The probate papers of

madam Susan Powell include a receipt for seventy-five cents for “quinine pills,” the most common treatment for malaria. Although greatly reduced after 1880, malaria became endemic in parts of the southeastern United States. In 1850, 7.8 percent of all deaths in the southern states resulted from malarial fevers. As many as 10,000 Union army recruits died from malarial fevers during the Civil War.<sup>116</sup>

Yellow Fever, which claimed thousands of Memphians in three separate outbreaks in the 1870s, also claimed prostitutes. At least two well-known madams died of Yellow Fever: Annie Cook and Fanny Walker. Memphians hailed both for their efforts in aiding those suffering from the disease. Cook converted her “Mansion” into a hospital to care for the sick, while Walker donated money to aid relief efforts. This has contributed to an heroic aura of selfless martyrdom surrounding Memphis prostitutes, but most sex workers, like most ordinary Memphians, thought of saving their own lives rather than others.<sup>117</sup>

In 1879, when a smaller Yellow Fever outbreak struck Memphis, Pauline Livingston fled the city by train. Upon her arrival at a depot near Little Rock, Arkansas, quarantine officer J.J. Jones stopped Livingston and demanded to know where she had come from. Livingston claimed to have come from Nashville, but could produce no proof. Jones, who recognized Livingston from the previous summer when she had fled Memphis for Hot Springs, knew her identity and denied her entry to Hot Springs until she could produce proof she had not been in Memphis after the start of the outbreak. Livingston, outraged at her treatment, circulated a letter in the Arkansas papers attacking Jones. Jitters with regard to the Yellow Fever persisted within the demimonde

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<sup>116</sup> Paul H. Bergeron, *Paths of the Past*, 70; Susan Powell probate record, 1876-02631, SCA; Sok Chul Hong, “Burden of Early Exposure to Malaria in the United States, 1850-1860,” *Journal of Economic History* 67 (December 2007), 1001-1035; U.S. Surgeon General’s Office, *The Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion, 1861–65*, Vol. 5. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1888).

<sup>117</sup> *Appeal*, September 30, 1873, September 22, 1878.



for several years after the 1878 and 1879 outbreaks. In 1880 the *Appeal* reported that “many members of the demi-monde, who left here early in the summer, fearing an epidemic, have returned to add to the sinfulness of the city.”<sup>118</sup>

Contaminated water also posed a danger for many Memphis residents, particularly because the city lacked a sewer system until the late nineteenth century. Many residents relied on outhouses or privies, and the potential for these to leak and seep into cisterns or wells proved a serious danger. In addition, the Bayou Gayoso served as an open sewer and Memphians dumped “all kinds of filth, such as the contents of privies, and dead animals” into it. Infections such as cholera and dysentery spread in this manner. Three cholera outbreaks in 1849, 1866 and 1873 claimed roughly 1,600 victims. Contaminated water claimed Arkansas prostitute Fannie Townsend, who after living in Memphis only twenty days contracted the “bloody flux” and died. The excavation of a cistern from a late nineteenth century Memphis brothel reveals that it became abandoned after 1887, when the discovery of artesian well water and the laying of water lines made the consumption of water much safer.<sup>119</sup>

While diseases such as Yellow Fever threatened only seasonally, venereal disease remained a constant scourge for prostitutes. Syphilis and gonorrhea, often referred to as “secret diseases” or “social diseases,” came to be associated with prostitution in the nineteenth century. Attempts at regulating commercial sex often emerged out of a desire on the part of reformers and physicians to limit the spread of these diseases. Figures for Memphis are incomplete, but between October of 1864 and February of 1865, thirty-four out of 134 registered prostitutes

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<sup>118</sup> *Appeal*, September 14, 1879, September 5, 1880.

<sup>119</sup> Lynette Boney Wrenn, *Crisis and Commission Government in Memphis: Elite Rule in a Gilded Age City* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998), 21, 82; O.F. Vedder, *History of the City of Memphis and Shelby County, Tennessee* Vol. 2 (New York, 1889), 59; C. Andrew Buchner, *Archaeological Data Recovery at the Lee's Landing Westin Hotel Site (40SY674), Beale Street Historic District, Memphis, Tennessee* (Panamerican Consultants, 2007), 79-80; 1880 U.S. Federal Census Mortality Schedule, Shelby County, 1.

visited the special women's wing of the City Hospital to be treated for venereal disease. If we take these figures as generally representative, then roughly one quarter of Memphis prostitutes suffered from venereal disease. The number of those infected may have been much higher, however, particularly when we consider that black women went unregistered. Some may have simply been carriers of these infections and not known. Roughly half of women with gonorrhea are asymptomatic.<sup>120</sup>

Prior to and after the brief period when Federal military authorities regulated prostitution, Memphis physicians provided treatment for prostitutes with venereal diseases, but it is not clear how many prostitutes may have been able to afford such services. Those who could afford the services of a doctor endured treatments involving poisonous or caustic chemicals such as mercury. The use of mercury for treating syphilis gave rise to the saying “a night in the arms of Venus leads to a lifetime of Mercury.” Treatment with mercury sometimes led to tooth loss, mouth ulcers, and sometimes death. Dr. Daniel S. Johnson, who operated a “private medical dispensary” at No. 17 Jefferson Street, specialized in the treatment of “private or secret diseases.” Johnson's office stood between Main and Front, one block from the largest concentration of brothels in town. Johnson claimed he could “eradicate” recent cases of syphilis and gonorrhea without resorting to the use of mercury. Johnson's advertisements noted he paid particular attention “to the diseases of women, and cures guaranteed.” Johnson may have dealt with a number of the city's prostitutes between 1860, when he founded his practice, and the 1880s.<sup>121</sup>

Others sought to treat themselves with over-the-counter medications, ointments and

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<sup>120</sup> Lowry, *The Story the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell*, 84-86; For more on the relationship between venereal disease and the regulation of prostitution, see Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

<sup>121</sup> *Appeal*, July 12, 1878.

patent remedies rather than seek medical attention. Patent remedies became a fixture of nineteenth century home medicine. The treatment of venereal diseases which vexed millions of men and women, provided a lucrative market for quacks. Ads for a “Cherokee Remedy” for gonorrhea began appearing in the Memphis papers in the late 1850s. The creators of the remedy claimed “the unfortunate, of either sex will be repaid by using this remedy, instead of placing themselves at the mercy of some Quack or Professor.” The efficacy of such remedies is doubtful, but customers eager for relief turned to them in large numbers. Many patent remedies often consisted of whiskey or even opiates combined with a number of inert ingredients. Their alcoholic or narcotic content probably provided some measure of relief. Prostitutes also employed more reliable treatments for venereal disease, particularly to allay the harsher symptoms. In January of 1875, madam Louisa Fisher purchased mercurial ointment, a topical ointment used in the treatment of syphilitic sores, from druggist Henry C. Steever.<sup>122</sup>

Largely speaking, prostitutes turned to alcohol and opiates to find relief from disease or to escape from their daily lives. Memphis prostitutes consumed vast amounts of alcohol, a fact amply illustrated by the number of arrests for drunkenness and disorderly conduct. The drunkenness of prostitutes is also illustrated by the number of accidents they experienced, such as Kate Cannon who fell out of a second story window after becoming highly intoxicated from drinking whiskey. An intoxicated Jennie Wilkins fell from her carriage and had her head crushed by a carriage wheel, killing her. Alice Coleman, a prostitute who lived near third and Jefferson, drank herself to death. After a day of binge drinking probably supplemented by opium, Coleman slipped into a coma and died of cardiac arrest.<sup>123</sup>

Newspaper accounts, coroner and probate records indicate that many prostitutes self-

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<sup>122</sup> *Appeal*, December 21, 1859; Louisa Fisher probate record, 1875-02355, SCA.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, *Appeal*, May 10, 1871, May 25, 1879, November 12, 1878.

medicated with morphine. Madam Biddie Sayers remarked to an *Appeal* reporter that “all women such as we are take [morphine] more or less for all sorts of complaints, and many are habitual morphine-eaters.” Judith Kelleher Schafer has found that in New Orleans prostitutes also relied heavily on this mixture to enable them to function from day to day. Suicides and overdoses from laudanum and morphine suggest a high rate of addiction to opiates. Drugstores offered laudanum for as little as twenty-five cents and it could be purchased without a prescription. Every level of society abused opiates, but they proved especially popular among the working class as they cost less than liquor. The *Appeal* took notice of the riot of opiate abuse among women in 1867, noting that of the seventy-five percent who took morphine without a prescription, 4/5ths were women.<sup>124</sup>

Some prostitutes turned to smoking opium, a drug made available in the back rooms of Chinese laundries throughout town. At least three opium dens operated in Memphis in the late 1870s, one right off Court Square. Henry Zing, who kept a laundry at 207 Main Street, had an opium den in the rear of his establishment. In 1879 the police raided Zing's and arrested four prostitutes and two men. The *Appeal* wrote of these dens “daily and nightly frequented by fast white men and lewd white women, and the orgies carried on are a disgrace to any civilized community.”<sup>125</sup>

The heavy reliance on opiates led to a number of overdoses among prostitutes. Four percent of the population of Memphis sex workers – or twenty-one women – committed suicide between 1850 and 1890. Most of these died from ingesting morphine or laudanum. Numerous attempted suicides, most by ingesting morphine, survived by the timely application of a stomach pump or inducing. Most suicides were between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five. These

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., May 30, 1884; Schafer, *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women*, 156.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., May 24, June 28, 1879.

figures are consistent with other areas: Marion Goldman found fifteen prostitutes on the Comstock Lode took their own lives between 1865 and 1880.<sup>126</sup>

Prostitutes often committed suicide because they had been abandoned by their lovers or as a result of familial problems. Failed romantic relationships appear as the most common cause of suicide. Ellen Bibbs grew depressed when her lover cut off all contact with her and joined the Confederate army. She took two ounces of morphine and died in a room above a restaurant overlooking the Bayou Gayoso. Melissa McLeod (alias Pauline Markham) penned a letter to her inconstant lover George (or Charley) White, naming him as the cause of her suicide before she took strychnine in August of 1880. The intervention of angry spouses also could lead to suicide. Laura Whitfield took her own life in 1870 after her lover's wife came to Memphis and threatened to kill her. A troubled family history not only led many women into prostitution, it convinced some to end their lives as well. Nellie Melrose's father murdered her mother, and as a result she grew up in an orphan asylum. Things seemed for a time to improve for Melrose after her marriage, but when her husband divorced her she embarked on a life of sex work. Melrose attempted suicide a number of times, finally succeeding in 1874. Some women related to reporters that alienation from their family had led them to take their own lives. As Florence Ewing lingered on her deathbed from the effects of morphine, she commented to reporters that her mother refused to forgive her for youthful dalliances with a young man, actions which had led her to adopt a life of prostitution.<sup>127</sup>

Newspapers often romanticized prostitutes who took their own lives. The suicide of Lee

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<sup>126</sup> These figures are derived from newspaper articles between 1850 and 1900 in the *Appeal*, *Ledger*, *Argus*, *Avalanche*, and *Bulletin*, as well as taken from Memphis Death Records, 1848-1963, SCA.

<sup>127</sup> *Appeal*, July 9, 1861, August 19, 1880, December 10, 1879, June 3, 1874, January 15, 1887; For a fascinating examination of the influence of the Civil War and the severing of social ties on suicide, see David Silkenat, *Moments of Despair: Suicide, Divorce, and Debt in Civil War Era North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

Hall, a white seventeen-year old sex worker in the brothel of madam Clarke, became an occasion for reference to Arthurian legend. A reporter dispatched by the *Ledger* described the dead girl thusly:

She was elegantly dressed in white satin, her hands encased in white silk gloves lay clasped across her breast. In her dark hair appeared roses, and she looked like the picture of Elaine the lilly maid of Astolot as she floated in the barge past the white towers of Camelot. The deceased was a pretty brunette, age about 18 years, of prepossessing manners and appearance.

One wonders whether this wistful reporter may have admired Lee Hall in life. While this is an extreme example of the manner in which the press transformed dead prostitutes into romantic, pure victims in death, typical stories portrayed them as such in less purple prose.<sup>128</sup>

The press never gave black prostitutes this kind of treatment. The only instance of a newspaper covering a black prostitute's suicide is devoid of these sentimental details. The *Appeal* described Minnie Whittaker, who died from ingesting morphine in June of 1889, as a “dusky depraved.” While it became customary to print the affecting history of a white courtesan, the *Appeal* only described her as a “saddle-colored woman” who lived at 189 Gayoso Street. Far from being eulogized as an erring victim, the *Appeal* lampooned Whittaker's death. Not only had her white lover threatened to kill himself twice over her death, but black prostitutes maintained she would rise from the dead. “The whole of Gayoso Street, or that part of it for several blocks on each side of the house, was full of excitement and babble last night” due to a report that Whittaker would soon return from the dead. Stories of superstitious black prostitutes who consulted dream books and conjure women appeared frequently in the papers.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> *Ledger*, May 10, 1875.

<sup>129</sup> *Appeal*, June 22, 1889.

Coroner's records, which seldom give professions of deceased women, makes collecting mortality figures on black prostitutes difficult. Overall, black Memphians suffered a much higher mortality than whites. In 1876, Memphis mortuary reports recorded 652 deaths among the white population and 601 among African Americans, who only made up roughly one quarter of the city's population. The rate of mortality of the white population during a six-month period in 1876 was fifteen per 1,000 while the rate of mortality for the city's black residents stood at thirty-eight per 1,000. This rate of death did not arise from infections such as Yellow Fever, against which many African Americans had a greater immunity than whites, but illnesses such as cholera and consumption.<sup>130</sup>

The rate of sexually transmitted diseases among black women is difficult to measure, but it distressed Memphis physicians and civic leaders. A letter to the editor of the *Appeal* from a Memphis physician giving the name of "Beta" warned that "syphilis and whiskey" would "eventually destroy the whole Negro race." The correspondent warned that "vicious habits" led African Americans along the path of the continent's indigenous people. "Is the negro going the way of the Indian?" He asked. "Does the race decrease, and if so, can we check this decay?"<sup>131</sup>

Worries over the effects of black vice were not rooted in morality, but in concerns over the disappearance of black laborers. The *Appeal* called for greater police vigilance in suppressing black prostitution, which transpired "in the most shameless and open manner." Black prostitution seemed a facet of what every pro-slavery theorist had warned of before the Civil War: freedom spelled decline and extinction for inferior races. Extinction theory, which held that allegedly weaker and less intelligent races would naturally die out when forced to compete on an equal level with Europeans, seemed to be clearly illustrated by the grinding poverty, crime, and disease

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., December 3, 1876.

<sup>131</sup> *Appeal*, August 28, 1887, September 6, 1877.

that beset freedmen in the middle of the 1870s. In the minds of white observers, the growth of black prostitution became synonymous with the seemingly natural decline of a race believed to be inferior. Democrat leaders believed the situation could only be addressed if blacks ceased “hurling themselves at the polls against those who give them employment” and cooperated with whites. White leaders considered blacks a “good institution” for the South, placed there by God “in his wisdom.” Whites had it as their patriarchal duty to ensure that freedmen who could not take care of themselves received protection from the destructive hand of their own nature.<sup>132</sup>

The destructive hand of black prostitution not only spread debilitating disease, it suppressed fertility and doomed the black race to extinction. The *Appeal* commented that, “the best physicians of the country tell us that neglect of their offspring, abandonment of the sick, and vicious habits, are doing the work of destruction for the unfortunate negro,” and these habits would soon “civilize him from off the face of the earth.” A visitor to the cotton producing states reporting on the “labor question” remarked that “in nearly all the large cities and towns where they are congregated in the greatest numbers, the majority of the negro women, it may be safely said, are living in an open and avowed system of prostitution.” Out of the thousands of black women he saw, he claimed that no more than fifty seemed pregnant, nor did he see more than one hundred black children below the age of four. All of this pointed “unmistakably to the gradual extinction of the race.”<sup>133</sup>

Whether observers saw children or not, they indeed lived in brothels. Memphians believed that prostitutes in general failed as mothers or abandoned their children. Stories of abandoned infants found at or near houses of prostitution appeared occasionally in papers, as did

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.; For more on extinction theory, see Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 103. See also Mia Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 90, 195.

<sup>133</sup> *Appeal*, September 6, 1877, July 17, 1869.



abortions performed on prostitutes. The subject of reproductive health, motherhood and parenting in the sex trade is complex. Anne M. Butler found the instability of prostitutes' lives did not make for good mothers, and that the “harshness and brutality of the lives of the mothers descended upon the children in full measure.” Darla Brock's work on Memphis prostitutes during the Civil War emphasizes infanticide and the death of children.<sup>134</sup>

The apparent lack of motherly feelings among prostitutes has been overstated. Some sex workers clearly cared for and provided for their children in the best manner possible given the conditions of work in the sex trade, which must have presented a tremendous hardship for them. Some, particularly high class prostitutes and madams, could provide for the education of their children at schools in the north or the east. The majority of children of sex workers did not receive these advantages. Many children simply died from malnutrition or disease, which proved common for many lower class children during the nineteenth century. Evidence suggests, however, that the children of prostitutes sometimes died through neglect or through murderous intent. In some instances, prostitutes abandoned their children for unknown reasons, either through suicide or flight. In the few instances when sex workers appeared in the press showing care for children, journalists depicted them as unstable, obsessive mothers.

Most often, references to prostitutes as mothers centered on stories relating to abortion. But evidence suggests many apparent cases of abortion stemmed from stillborn children being disposed of in the most economical way available. Between the early 1860s and the mid-1870s, the police discovered a number of dead infants in areas near brothels or on the premises of brothels. In February, May, and July of 1861, authorities discovered three dead infants, two in the bayou east of town and one in a ravine near the Market Street bridge. All three dead newborns

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<sup>134</sup> Butler, *Daughters of Joy*, 38; Brock, “Memphis's Nymphs Du Pave,” 59.

had been weighted down with either stones or iron bars. One child had been “dressed neatly in white linen, and the arms were tied across the breast.” A reporter for the *Appeal* noted that not all apparent cases of dead infants resulted from “illicit intercourse,” but speaking on the authority of “a public medical official” claimed that parents disposed of stillborn infants “often surreptitiously . . . on account of the outrageous expense attending burial in the regular cemeteries.”<sup>135</sup>

Not all had been born dead, however. A coroner's inquest revealed that one child's neck had been broken. Another newborn discovered behind the city jail in 1863 had a crushed skull. In 1872, the police found the body of a stillborn child on the porch leading to a bagnio on Market Square, wrapped in newspaper. Such a public disposition of the child's body may indicate a disregard for the child, or an inability to bury the child properly. Women may also have abandoned children at the doorsteps of brothels as a way of hiding the origin of an unwanted child. That same year, the coroner held an inquest on a two-month old infant at the brothel of Annie Gallagher on Poplar Street. Esquire Spelman and the assembled jurors found that the child had died from neglect and diarrhea.<sup>136</sup>

The frequency of abortions among prostitutes is difficult to gauge, particularly when we consider the existence of legal sanctions, that it occurred in secret, and that drugs and herbs could be taken that produced results similar to a stillbirth. Fees for abortions ranged from ten to twenty-five dollars and could be obtained from physicians such as Dr. Daniel Johnson, who operated a practice specializing in the “diseases of women.” Johnson provided herbs to his patients that would produce a stillbirth within six days. Abortions frequently proved dangerous

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<sup>135</sup> *Appeal*, February 27, 1861, July 9, 1861, May 23, 1861, October 7, 1872; Brock, “Memphis's Nymphs Du Pave,” 59, 68 n. 4. The fact that most methods of abortion at that time produced results similar to that of stillbirth makes it impossible to know how many of these infants were born dead or were intentionally aborted.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, October 7, 1872; See Brock, above.

for the women undergoing them. In 1876, one of Johnson's clients, Kate M'Cormick, died as a result of an abortion he performed. The police arrested Johnson for murder, but a jury acquitted him. In 1880, Fannie Walker, an inmate of Pauline Livingston's house, purchased an abortion from an unknown abortionist. This abortion, performed with a long syringe, nearly killed Walker.<sup>137</sup>

Neglect, or lack of resources, proved a common cause of death for the children of prostitutes. The child of Margaret Hayden, the madam of a low brothel near the southern limits of the city, died from malnutrition in 1858. The five-month-old daughter of Anna St. Clair, a Canadian immigrant, died from dysentery in 1859 after only a short time in Memphis. The Bluff City had an annual death rate of forty-seven per 1,000, the highest of any city in the country. Despite being situated on a river, fresh water could not be easily obtained, and many relied upon shallow wells that had been dug near privies. This naturally led to many dying from dysentery or the “bloody flux.”<sup>138</sup>

A number of prostitutes abandoned their children. Some orphaned their children through suicide, although there is evidence to suggest that others abandoned their children in brothels and left town. Prostitute Mollie Bevell committed suicide in 1866 and left two children, “a good-looking, smart girl of eleven years and a boy of five,” to face life without the support or protection of a parent. As to what became of the children, the *Appeal* mentioned nothing, only that their mother had been “decently interred” by the sanitary police. The children may have gone to a local orphan asylum, but they could just as easily have taken to living on the streets. Laura Whitfield, an inmate of Annie Gallagher's brothel, had a four-year-old daughter from a

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., February 10, 1876, January 14, 1880.

<sup>138</sup> Memphis Death Records, 1848-1963, March 28, 1858, File No. 4662, November 27, 1859, 5978, SCA; John Duffy, *The Sanitarians: A History of American Public Health* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 146.

previous marriage, whom “she loved dearly, almost to distraction.” Whitfield became distraught when the wife of her lover appeared in town and threatened her life. Simultaneously, Whitfield's mother came to town to “rescue her grandchild from the evil influences under which it was being brought up.” This drove Whitfield to purchase a large amount of morphine, which she ingested, and died. The reporter depicted Whitfield as a mother who loved her children “to distraction.” Such a depiction indicated to readers that her hysterical attachment to her children was not worth of the name of motherhood.<sup>139</sup>

Probably more common was the practice of simply leaving children in brothels while prostitutes relocated to other cities to ply their trade. In July of 1872, again at Annie Gallagher's brothel, a prostitute skipped town precipitately without paying her bill, leaving her child behind in the tender care of Gallagher. When the itinerant sex worker settled into her new home, Gallagher refused to send the child unless she received payment in full. For this action, the *Appeal* described Gallagher as a “Female Shylock.” The police brought the matter to the attention of Esquire Spelman, who did not recognize the right to hold a child hostage in lieu of payment for debt, and had the girl released to her mother. The unsettled nature of prostitutes and their constant movement from one boarding house or city to another may have meant that many children simply stayed behind while their mothers worked in other localities.<sup>140</sup>

But there are glimpses of prostitutes and madams caring for children, including the children of other women. Sarah Gaynor, who kept a brothel in “Hell's Half Acre” took care of numerous children that lived in her “shebang.” Her house was little more than a shanty, and the scene of almost nightly barn dances, but newspaper and probate records reveal that she spent much of her time acting as the operator of a daycare. She kept a crib in her quarters and a

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<sup>139</sup> *Ledger*, October 29, 1866; *Avalanche*, December 8, 1870.

<sup>140</sup> *Appeal*, July 18, 1872.

reporter found her standing over a stove, surrounded by mixed-race children, cooking bacon. The press took to referring to her as “Mother Gaynor.”<sup>141</sup>

Prostitutes took special pity on children who came from circumstances similar to their own, the sick, or the victims of rape. A story in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* related how an unnamed Memphis madam took care of the dying, illegitimate son of a young Memphis socialite and provided for an “elegant” funeral, bedecking him in robes “almost becoming royalty.” At the height of the 1878 Yellow Fever epidemic, a physician volunteering for the Howard Association considered former prostitutes to make the best nurses, and to be “more successful than any others” in nursing sick children. Children who had been victimized by human agency also became the object of prostitute's charitable efforts. In 1879, sex workers Hattie Edwards and Mattie Williams “walked around the city” soliciting money from other prostitutes to provide medical care to Lizzie Sherwood, a child who had been raped by the “white monster” William Johnson. The women raised fifteen dollars for the girl, which they turned over to the police to dispense as they saw fit. The *Appeal* noticed this and commented that “charity is not monopolized by the virtuous.” A concern for juvenile rape victims seems a little strange considering that some houses of prostitution in the city trafficked in young girls. It may have been that the women saw themselves in Sherwood, who had been victimized sexually at a young age.<sup>142</sup>

Some sex workers, particularly higher class prostitutes and madams, could afford to have their children educated and provide them with material comforts. Historian Franklin Wright suggests that Annie Cook, perhaps the most well-known Memphis madam, probably had her son, G.S. Cook, attend a boarding school in Louisville, Kentucky. Probate records reveal that prior to

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<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, September 4, 1868.

<sup>142</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, September 21, 1869; *Appeal*, October 16, 1878, July 3, 1879.

her death, Cook ordered a suit for her son from a Louisville tailor, totaling fifty-four dollars. In addition, Cook willed her son two diamond rings, a gold watch and chain, and a set of gold sleeve buttons, amounting to \$220. Madam Susan Powell provided for her daughter Alice, who boarded in Cincinnati, with alpaca coats, mink furs, and music lessons, as well as more mundane considerations such as money for school books, medicine, and doctor visits. Such consideration was rare, however; most prostitutes did not accumulate nearly as much money or property as Cook or Powell. Despite providing money and clothing for their children, these necessities were no substitute for being present in their lives. Just how often madams had contact with their children is unknown.<sup>143</sup>

Others gave up their children for adoption or boarded them with friends in the city rather than expose them to brothel life. Margaret Hayden boarded her only daughter, Mary Louisa, with Metropolitan Police Detective Benjamin Garrett and his wife, forwarding them \$500 to cover any expenses. After Hayden's death, Garrett adopted the thirteen-year old Mary Louisa as his daughter. Mary Louisa's story not only underscores the often heart-wrenching circumstances mothers and children in the sex trade faced, but also the intimate ties between the police and sex workers.<sup>144</sup>

Living rootless lives and struggling to stay afloat in a violent industry, Memphis prostitutes encountered difficulties as mothers. Prostitutes, however, possessed motherly, nurturing feelings, but the circumstances of their lives made child-rearing uniquely challenging. Drug addiction, violence, and poverty bred unspeakable misery in the lives of sex worker's children. Well-to-do madams understood that the sex trade environment harmed children and

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<sup>143</sup> Franklin Wright, "Annie Cook: 'The Mary Magdalene of Memphis,'" 44-54; Susan Powell probate record, 1876-02631, SCA.

<sup>144</sup> Margaret Hayden probate record, 1870-01117, SCA.

sent them to live elsewhere.

The average sex worker faced a harsh life. Orphaned, abandoned, or impoverished, many women began sex work at a young age, trading sexual favors as children for a few coins. Many adopted this life course out of necessity, but some minor prostitutes did so against their will. While the competition for business and lovers between sex workers could explode into violence, they also formed friendships with one another and pursued leisure and social activities outside of their places of work. Prostitution provided some young women with the means to claim autonomy and to participate in a youth culture centered on urban amusements. Madams and sex workers also had complex relationships characterized by exploitation and affection.

Dogged by poor health and often addicted to alcohol and morphine, suicides and attempted suicides proved common among prostitutes. Often living in areas near stagnant water such as the Bayou Gayoso, prostitutes faced higher exposure to deadly diseases such as Yellow Fever, cholera, and the “bloody flux.” The death of prostitutes and instances of human suffering reveal that sex workers had some sense of solidarity as a group and felt connected to the wider society, particularly in the manner prostitutes collected charitable donations to defray costs for burial or to provide money for those who had suffered some tragedy. The struggles and humanity of prostitutes can also be seen in the ways they reared their children. Generally speaking, prostitutes did not make effective mothers. This did not arise from anything in their disposition, but because of the attendant poverty and disorderly circumstances of life as a prostitute.

Reformers and prostitutes also had complex relationships. Middle-class reformers failed to grasp that many sex workers viewed prostitution as an escape from the world they created and promoted, the world of self-control, hard work, and thrift. Although some prostitutes embraced reform, others repeatedly attempted to escape places of reformation. Reformers considered some

women more deserving of pity and help and others, because of their race or class origin, depraved and incapable of reform. These two factors fatally undermined the efforts of elite women to reform prostitutes and purify the moral landscape of the city.

Memphians remained divided on the subject prostitutes and sex work. Many Memphians evinced a great fascination with the demimonde in the mid to late nineteenth century. Newspapers romanticized and at times even celebrated sex workers following the Civil War, transforming them into suffering exiles. This depended, however, upon race and class. The press and elite reformers never celebrated black prostitutes. While newspapers increasingly came to promote notion of victimhood, many continued to view sex workers as titillating, humorous, and even necessary figures. Others simply viewed them as a nuisance or “social ulcers” to be banished to prisons or workhouses. But despite the many opinions on sex workers, they continued to be tolerated and even actively protected by elite men, city officials, and the police. By the 1870s, prostitution had become too deeply entrenched in the economic, cultural, and political life of the city for reformers to ever hope of stamping it out.



## **CHAPTER FOUR: “ALL THINGS WITHIN HER SPHERE MINISTER TO HER WILL:” BROTHEL ENTREPRENEURS AND THE BUSINESS OF PROSTITUTION IN MEMPHIS**

1880 began as a bad year for Maggie Britton. Once at the top of the brothel world in Memphis, she now found herself hocking cigars and turning tricks in Louisville, Kentucky. Ten years previous, a twenty-eight year old Britton came to Memphis from Kentucky. Already a sex worker prior to her arrival, she came to the Bluff City to embark on a career as a bordello proprietor. Britton initially kept a small house of ill-fame with an Irish woman named Ellen Dutton between a shoemaker's shop and a saloon on Washington Street. Not content to run a small operation, and leaving Dutton behind, Britton hustled for six years to make a name for herself in the sporting world. She weathered the 1873 Yellow Fever epidemic, a plague that killed a number of her fellow madams, and by 1876 took charge as madam of 34 Gayoso, the glittering palace of sin later associated with Annie Cook. Her tenure there, however, appears to have been short-lived. Dogged by money and legal troubles, Britton left Memphis and returned to Kentucky.<sup>1</sup>

In the early Summer of 1880, matters reached their lowest ebb. Britton found herself living in a Louisville boardinghouse with two seamstresses, two policemen, and a consumptive preacher. Too old to work in the parlor houses, she operated a cigar stand, a business which often served as a front for the lowest class of prostitutes. By now in her mid-thirties, and too old to

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<sup>1</sup> 1870 United States Federal Census, Shelby, Memphis, Tennessee, Ward 3, 10; Appeal, January 28, May 2, 1876; A.E. Sholes, Boyle, Chapman & Co.'s Directory of the City of Memphis For 1876, 99.

work as one of the parlor house inmates, she came precariously close to slipping into the ranks of the crib prostitutes and streetwalkers. Britton had fallen on hard times. But one day good news came from Memphis:

DIED. RIORDAN - Saturday afternoon, October 2, 1880, at 4 o'clock, Mrs. Ella Riordan, in the 37th year of her age."<sup>2</sup>

Madam Agatha Riordan, who adopted the working name of Ella, succumbed to consumption in October, leaving her Causey Street house in Memphis without a boss. Riordan's death proved a boon for Britton, who quickly filled the vacancy in management at 21 Causey Street. Britton returned to a city under a new form of government since the 1878 Yellow Fever epidemic, a form of government more amenable to profiting from prostitution, and set about reclaiming her place in the city's demimonde. Within two decades Blanche reclaimed her position as the top madam in Memphis. She built a brothel at a cost of ten thousand dollars, speculated in real estate, and made powerful allies in lawyers and merchants, including the South's first black millionaire, Robert Church.<sup>3</sup>

While Britton's life and career encountered an unexpected and welcome turn in the summer of 1880, another madam, Eliza Goodrich, lost nearly everything. That year, at fifty-one, Goodrich became the resident of the Memphis "Home for the Homeless," a charity home established by the Women's Christian Association. Blanche operated brothels in Memphis since before the Civil War. Throughout the 1860s and 1870s, Goodrich prospered: she accumulated \$4,000 in personal property and made alliances with Memphis merchants and lawyers. She spent

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<sup>2</sup> *Appeal*, October 3, 1880.

<sup>3</sup> 1880 United States Federal Census, Jefferson, Louisville, Kentucky, 13; *Appeal*, October 3, 1880.; Wrenn, *Crisis and Commission*, 50, 51; National Home & Building & Loan to Maggie Britton, Book 245, pg. 123, SCA; Maggie Britton to Robert R. Church, book 243, pg. 337, SCA.

huge sums on furniture and décor, richly furnishing her bordello with mahogany furniture and tapestry curtains. She participated in a businesswoman's network made up of madams, widowed landladies, and milliners. But by the middle of the 1870s, an association of citizens near her Washington Street bordello petitioned the city to have her house abated as a nuisance. Months of legal wrangling brought the matter to the Supreme Court of Tennessee. Despite ruling, on a technicality, that her house could not be abated by the city as a nuisance, legal costs and negative public attention harmed her business. The new decade, which had brought renewal and change to a city battered by two Yellow Fever epidemics, augured poorly for Goodrich. Indigent and in ill-health, she died from a stroke two years later. The city press, usually keen to report on the activities of the demimonde, took no notice of the death of a woman who had been an infamous madam a decade before.<sup>4</sup>

The stories of Goodrich and Britton are illustrative of the diverse careers of Memphis brothel managers. Many struggled, unsuccessfully, to carve out a niche for themselves in the river town, drifting back into the ranks of common sex workers, marrying, or moving into other areas of unskilled labor. Others would prosper for decades, only to perish in one of two Yellow Fever epidemics. Some, like Eliza Goodrich, reached the pinnacle of success in their profession, only to fall into utter destitution. Others, moved by appeals of evangelical reformers, left the world of sex work and joined the ranks of anti-prostitution crusaders.

Unlike Mary Ann Hall, the successful Washington, D.C. madam who retired with a net worth of \$87,000, Memphis madams rarely retired to enjoy riches and comfort. Madams

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<sup>4</sup> 1880 U.S. Federal Census, Schedules of Defective, Dependent, and Delinquent Classes, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee, 34; 1870 U.S. Federal Census, Ward 5, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee, 9; Eliza Goodrich to Helen Blanche, Book 47, pg. 130, Goodrich to Fred Kropp, Book 65, pg. 224, Book 60, pg. 459, Goodrich to G.F. Rowe, Book 55, pg. 501, Book 59, pg. 7, Goodrich to E.M. Yerger, Book 56, pg. 504, SCA; *Public Ledger*, November 4, 1875; *Shelby County Register of Deaths*, February 15, 1882, SCA; *Elmwood Cemetery Daily Burial Record*, February 16, 1882, 78, SCA.

accumulated wealth and lived in comfortable, but modest dwellings. They surrounded themselves with rich furnishings and adorned themselves with expensive jewelry and dresses, but Memphis proved an exceedingly difficult place to operate a brothel between 1860 and 1900. Disruption brought on by outside forces such as disease and war cut short the careers of a significant number of the city's madams and made the accumulation of wealth difficult. Success, therefore, often meant remaining in business, paying creditors, or simply surviving.<sup>5</sup>

The popular memory surrounding Memphis madams centers on one figure: Annie Cook. Remembered for opening her brothel to the sick during the 1878 Yellow Fever epidemic, a disease to which she later succumbed, Cook fit the Victorian image of a reformed “Magdalene” who repented of her ways. After Cook's death, tributes to her memory poured in from all over the country. Memphis ministers held up Cook and one of her inmates, Lorena Meade, as examples of true repentance. Today, costumed interpreters portraying Annie Cook welcome visitors to Elmwood Cemetery. The former site of Cook's brothel, the “Mansion House,” has its own (inconspicuous) historical marker.<sup>6</sup>

The memory of Annie Cook as a repentant “soiled dove” fits with a Victorian conception of prostitution -- a view which conceals more about Memphis madams than it reveals. The city's sex workers and madams did not refrain from charitable acts on a number of occasions and Cook, in this sense, did not differ from many of her class. Fannie Walker, another madam who died from Yellow Fever in 1873, donated money for the relief of those suffering from the fever. In other instances, madams and sex workers took up collections for the relief of others. Other

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<sup>5</sup> Donna J. Seifert, Elizabeth Barthold O'Brien, and Joseph Balicki, “Mary Ann Hall's First-Class House: The Archaeology of a Capital Brothel,” in Robert A. Schmidt and Barbara L. Voss, eds. *Archaeologies of Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 2000), 117-128.

<sup>6</sup> Franklin Wright, “Annie Cook, ‘The Mary Magdalene of Memphis,’” *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* 43 (1989).

madams and sex workers also “reformed,” whatever that may have meant. Lorena Meade, who nursed the dying Annie Cook, also claimed to have changed her ways. Meade remarked that her “future life, so far as I can make it, will be devoted to redemption and reformation.” But Meade continued to operate a brothel in Memphis for several years after Cook's death. Cook and Meade had compassion on the sick and the suffering, but this did not preclude the continued operation of a house of ill-fame. Reformers and promoters of Victorian notions of womanhood fashioned an image of Cook and Meade that fit this conception.<sup>7</sup>

Although memorialized as outcasts and repentant martyrs, Memphis madams constituted a class of entrepreneurs who united the world of business with that of homemaking. As businesswomen madams proved anything but outcasts, but key players in the development of the city's entertainment and nightlife. They not only conducted business with each other, but with an array of male merchants, lawyers, and professionals.

The success of a madam depended upon three things: tapping into notions of domesticity in her décor and deportment, making alliances with elite men, including city authorities, and assembling and managing a reliable staff of prostitutes, servants, and entertainers. Race and class were central factors in achieving these, and so for many madams success meant constructing a new persona independent of their often lower-class origins.<sup>8</sup>

Ambitious women, madams saw the management of their own brothel as either a means to attain some level of economic independence or to escape from the harsh life of a sex worker. As Paula Petrick has argued for madams in Helena, Montana, brothel management was an entrepreneurial activity. Running a brothel required a high degree of business acumen. Petrick

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<sup>7</sup> *Appeal*, September 30, 1873; John McLeod Keating, *A History of the Yellow Fever* (Memphis: Printed for the Howard Association, 1879), 190.

<sup>8</sup> Cynthia M. Blair has found black madams fashioning a brand of domesticity in Chicago parlor houses. See Blair, *I've Got to Make My Livin': Black Women's Sex Work in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago*, 60.

argues that brothel operators in the frontier mining community formed a “businesswoman's network” by mortgaging property to other fancy women. It is for this reason, and the upward mobility of many women who entered into brothel management, that Petrick refers to madams as “capitalists with rooms.”<sup>9</sup>

Probate records reveal Memphis madams as shrewd businesswomen who sold both sex and domesticity. Madams look little different from operators of small hotels or boardinghouses. Sometimes with the assistance of servants or other sex workers, madams kept track of finances, negotiated with grocers and merchants, made choices about décor, took care of sick boarders, hired and managed chambermaids, cleaned rooms, policed their establishments, and recruited new “talent.” A “female boardinghouse,” a polite euphemism for a house of prostitution, meant just that: a boardinghouse. This is an important aspect of brothel management often obscured by the nature of the trade: madams worked as professional homemakers. Sex seems central to the operation of a brothel, but madams spent a great deal of effort in creating attractive domestic spaces that catered to middle-class ideas of luxury and domesticity.

To describe the business community of madams that existed in Memphis between 1860 and 1900 as a “businesswoman's network” would only be partially correct. Madams did indeed conduct business with each other: they lent one another money and rented properties to green, aspiring madams. In addition, other female entrepreneurs such as widowed property owners and milliners counted madams and sex workers among their most important customers. But madams also relied upon an important web of male business partners, creditors, landlords, and other merchants. For every business transaction between madams, two transactions between fancy women and male landlords, lawyers or merchants took place. Sex work and legitimate commerce

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<sup>9</sup> Paula Petrick, “Capitalists With Rooms: Prostitution in Helena, Montana, 1865-1900,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 21 (Spring 1991), 28-40; Ruth Rosen, *Lost Sisterhood*, 87-88.

formed a symbiotic relationship in the river town.

The careers of madams highlight the ties between prostitution and the local economy. If “King Cotton” ruled Memphis in the middle of the nineteenth century, then prostitution served as its concubine. Cotton brought thousands of men to Memphis, transforming the city into a raucous masculine landscape. A trip to Memphis from the hinterlands of Arkansas, Tennessee or Mississippi inevitably involved indulgence for many male visitors. Commission merchants feted planters in lavish halls of prostitution while rough stevedores and steamboat workers, black and white, sought an evening's pleasure with music hall girls. Madams welcomed them, offering sex and hospitality. In the process they reaped financial rewards. Rather than existing on the fringes of city life, madams maintained open accounts with merchant houses and conducted business with city officials. These ties went beyond the simple exchange of money for goods and services -- merchants worked to ensure brothels remained in business. An examination of over 30 leases, mortgages, warranty deeds, and probate records between 1850 and 1890 has enabled the assemblage of a composite picture of the month to month operation of middling and elite Memphis parlor houses. These records provide a window into the intimately interwoven nature of the local “legitimate” businesses of Memphis and the “illegitimate” realm of sexual commerce.

Memphis furniture merchants in particular played a central role in supporting prostitution through legal and financial support. Deeds, wills, and court records reveal the centrality of furniture and décor to the brothel business. The furnishings selected by middling and elite Memphis madams indicate the importance of projecting a genteel, domestic image to customers and boarders. Madams designed these spaces to resemble homes, not just for the girls and women employed in them, but primarily for the men who frequented them. For customers, the

relaxed, home-like atmosphere formed a large part of the appeal of a brothel. Analysis of an archaeological dig at the site of an 1880s brothel in California found a similar adoption of genteel, “decorous” furnishings that gave customers the “illusion of being engaged in something more than merely a business transaction.”<sup>10</sup>

The success of the madam depended upon her ability to present boarders and customers with an attractive and genteel home-like environment. Cultivating a middle-class and elite clientele depended upon fashioning a brand of domesticity rooted in conceptions of the ideal Victorian home. A brothel, for all of its tawdry associations, succeeded or failed on the madam's ability to fashion a space that resembled the homes of their customers. The ideal sporting house blended an idealized home environment with male entertainment. Timothy Gilfoyle noted that New York parlor houses “reflected an emphasis on replicating the atmosphere, privacy, and physical environment of the middle-class home.” Cynthia Blair also found an emphasis on the middle class character of brothels in the Chicago sporting house directory. The compiler of this particular brothel guide described one brothel as “pervaded with an atmosphere of quiet elegance” and another as being “one of the most home-like establishments in the city.”<sup>11</sup>

For Memphis madams, fashioning this brand of domesticity depended upon participating in consumerism: purchasing furniture, décor, pianos, and clothing. It also depended upon recruiting the right employees, entertainers, and boarders. Madams concocted new personalities for their boarders and themselves -- converting unpolished, arriviste former chambermaids and socially awkward young women into exotic, cultured “courtesans.” A madam succeeded or failed on her ability to cultivate a myth.

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<sup>10</sup> Adrian Praetzellis and Mary Praetzellis, “Mangling Symbols of Gentility in the Wild West: Case Studies in Interpretive Archaeology,” *American Anthropologist* No. 3 (Sep., 2001), 645-654.

<sup>11</sup> Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 164; Blair, *I've Got to Make My Livin'*, 61.



Race and class played a role in what madams could aspire to. Not all brothels could project an image of domestic elegance. A hierarchy existed within the demimonde that mirrored that of the wider world. Madams who served the needs of laboring men did not operate houses as elegant as their more elite counterparts, but they tried. Working class houses could project an air of semi-respectability through furniture and attire, but visitors to these houses found the women to be older, less healthy, and addicted to alcohol, morphine, or opium. These brothels often stood above grogeries that rang with the sound of tinny pianos and barrel organs or in cheap tenements with peeling wallpaper. At least one Memphis house segregated clients by class, providing two separate parlor spaces for elite and working class customers. The elite parlor glittered with silver servers, chandeliers, and alabaster vases whilst its working class counterpart featured plain furniture and remnant rugs.<sup>12</sup>

While middling and elite madams aspired to present a domestic ideal, lower-class madams appealed to the tastes of the masses. Other than cheap grog, low brothels offered barn dances, the can-can, gambling, and itinerant astrologers as inducements to visit their houses. Some of these lower-class madams, particularly those of color, affected the image of a seer or “conjure woman” who engaged in theatrical quotations from Shakespeare and Omar Khayyam.<sup>13</sup>

Madams of color faced unique difficulties in projecting an image of elegance and often ran low, run-down houses that catered to working-class blacks and whites. For black madams, success proved more difficult, particularly during the years of Reconstruction, when city officials targeted black vice districts for their associations with black political organization. Seemingly paradoxically, the hardening of racial boundaries with the establishment of Jim Crow contributed to the rise of black madams in the 1880s. With more stark racial boundaries in place, interracial

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<sup>12</sup> Pauline Livingstone probate record, 1880-05444, SCA.

<sup>13</sup> George Washington Lee, *Beale Street: Where the Blues Began* (McGrath, 1969), 114.

sex became a commodity madams could sell in the sequestered spaces of their bordellos.

Memphis developed a class of elite black madams who kept elegant parlor houses during this period. Driving interracial sex further underground made it that more lucrative.

This chapter consists of six sections. The first briefly addresses the demographics of brothel operators. Section two addresses the deep economic ties between prostitution and the wider business community of Memphis. This section also addresses the economic interest many powerful Memphians had in the business of prostitution. Section three is on the operation of a brothel and the ways in which madams decorated and managed their establishments. Section four continues along the same lines as section two, although focusing on the ways in which the Metropolitan Police exploited and protected houses of ill-fame. Section Five discusses black madams and their unique difficulties in running brothels in Memphis. Finally, section six gauges the overall success of Memphis brothel operators.

Table 1 Origins of Madams, 1860-1900

Place of Origin	1860	1870	1880	1900
Tennessee	6	1	3	1 (11)
Ireland	3	1	-	1 (5)
The North & Midwest	2	3	3	5 (13)
The South	-	2	4	9 (15)
England	-	3	-	- (3)
France	1	-	1	- (2)
Other	1	-	1	2 (4)
Unknown	9	2	17	- (28)

The stereotypical image of a brothel madam consists of a matronly middle-aged woman. Most madams, however were either the same age or only slightly older than common sex workers prior to the Civil War. In 1860 the ages of madams ranged from nineteen to forty-one,

with the average age being about twenty-two years old. Ten years later, the average age of madams had increased by almost ten years. Ages ranged from twenty-two to forty-one, with most either in their late twenties or early thirties. The age increase after 1860, while partly explained by the continued operation of three madams during the intervening years, likely resulted from the frontier nature of prostitution prior to the Civil War. The absence of established houses of ill-fame in the late 1850s enabled younger women to try their hand at brothel management. As the business landscape became more crowded, greater competition, capital, and necessary experience excluded aspiring madams below the age of 25. Figures from the 1880 and 1900 census reveal the average age of madams remained quite constant for the remainder of the decade, hovering at roughly thirty-two years.<sup>14</sup>

Census data reveals a more diverse sex worker population in Memphis than Nashville. The 1860 Nashville census reveals that out of 207 prostitutes, three-fifths hailed from Tennessee, Kentucky, or Alabama, with only four foreign-born women. In contrast, thirteen percent of Memphis sex workers came from outside of the United States. For the forty-year period between the Civil War and the turn of the century, one out of every ten sex workers in the Bluff City came from Europe. Madams also had diverse origins. In 1860, close to one third of Memphis brothel operators came from Tennessee. Three madams hailed from Ireland, two from the North, and two other madams originated in France and “on the sea.” A further nine madams have no given place of birth, but surnames suggest most of these came from Ireland. The 1870 census reveals a decrease in native Tennesseans, with no one point of origin representing a majority. Interestingly, one quarter of madams in 1870 were born in England. Between 1860 and 1900, only one out of every eight madams (eleven) were from the Volunteer State. A greater number of

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<sup>14</sup> This data is derived from 1860, 1870, 1880, and 1900 U.S. Federal Census data.

madams hailed from the North and Northwest (thirteen) and the wider South (fifteen). Immigrants made up a significant number (fifteen) of madams during this period. As the decade waned, brothel management came to be increasingly dominated by women from the South. Brothel management continued, however, to attract a significant number of immigrants, including women hailing from Ireland, Canada, and Sweden. This greater diversity resulted from the river, which connected Memphis more immediately to New Orleans and the wider world.<sup>15</sup>

### **“Prostitution Cliques:” Madams and Their Supporters**

Memphis madams frequently conducted business within their circle of fellow brothel managers; they leased properties to one another, lent money, and entered into partnerships. A particularly illustrative example is that of Eliza Goodrich, Helen Blanche, and Mary Miller, who operated some of the finest Memphis bordellos before the Civil War. In December of 1860, thirty-year old Madam Eliza Goodrich called on Helen Blanche, a madam two years her junior, to discuss a business transaction at her Front Street *maison de joie*. Blanche intended to lease her Front Row brothel, which stood in the commercial heart of the city, to Goodrich. Blanche occupied a conspicuous position in the demimonde of Memphis: she and her brothel inmates had been extremely successful. Blanche – who probably took her working name from a renowned astrologer – accumulated over \$5,000 in personal property and her inmates accounted for another \$5,000. Dreams of upward mobility within the profession prompted her to lease this house to Goodrich. Many sex workers shared the aspiration of making the move from brothel inmate to

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<sup>15</sup> This data was also derived from census data for 1860, 1870, 1880, and 1900, as well as from the 1860 U.S Federal Census Population Schedule for Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee.

brothel operator, but it often proved elusive. Brothel management, if one's efforts met with success, could provide a measure of economic security often unobtainable by single women. Blanche not only succeeded at making this move, she established herself as the operator of a newer, larger brothel and the renter of another.<sup>16</sup>

For Eliza Goodrich, changing locations also held out the promise of growth and increased profits. At two rooms larger than Goodrich's Fifth Ward house, Blanche's old establishment stood in a growing entertainment district tied to the city's vice economy. This location proved more attractive to Goodrich than her Fifth Ward brothel, bounded on every side by boarding houses and hotels. As a location closer to the landing where working class men congregated, the new location promised greater profits. For \$100.00 a month, Blanche agreed to lease the house to Goodrich for one year.<sup>17</sup>

Blanche also entered into negotiations with another madam, forty-one year old Mary A. Miller, to lease a massive 37-room former hotel on Winchester Street known as the “Iron Clad” for use as a house of ill-fame. Anxious to pay off \$5,000 in debt to Jacob Weller, a Memphis contractor who rebuilt the “Iron Clad” after it burned in 1858, Miller asked an exorbitant five hundred dollars a month from Blanche. Management of the “Iron Clad” promised to secure Blanche's place at the top of the Memphis demimonde and assist the indebted Miller in paying her creditors. Renting to Helen Blanche enabled Miller, who nearly died at the hands of vigilantes, to retire from actively managing a brothel. Just days before Blanche and Miller met to arrange the lease of the house, a man named Daniel Casey threw a brick through the first floor parlor window and struck Miller in the head. Leasing the Iron Clad promised a much safer life as

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<sup>16</sup> Eliza Goodrich to Helen Blanche, Book 47, pg. 130; 1860 U.S. Federal Census, Fifth Ward, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee, 66; 1860 U.S. Federal Census, Second Ward, Memphis, Shelby County, TN, 20.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

a landlady for the aging madam.<sup>18</sup>

In April of 1861, Mary Miller entered into an agreement with Helen Blanche to lease the “Iron Clad” for two years. At five hundred dollars a month, the agreement brought in \$12,000. As an added incentive, Miller provided all of the furniture, washbasins, mirrors, and décor. Miller called on her friends in the city's elite to draw up the agreement. She turned to her attorney, John F. Sale, to write up the lease for her bordello. Sale, described by his colleagues as a “great blackguard” and a “worshipper of ladies,” also served as the attorney general of the criminal court.<sup>19</sup>

Madams hatched deals and depended upon one another in business matters, but they relied even more so on the services and protection of powerful men within the city's government and merchant class. This became much more apparent after the Civil War. Union occupation wrought what Kathleen Berkeley describes as a “middle-class revolution in municipal politics.” After 1862, the board of alderman came to be increasingly dominated by small shopkeepers, saloon operators, artisans, grocers, and lawyers. Many of these men hailed from outside the United States or from outside the South. Lawyers and professionals on the board rose from fourteen to nineteen percent of council members. The number of artisans and skilled tradesmen on the council also increased, from nineteen to twenty-five percent. Those who previously controlled city affairs, particularly cotton factors, commission merchants, and small manufacturers tied to the cotton economy, declined sharply in their representation on the city council. The mercantile interests tied to cotton growing and plantation provisioning declined from forty percent of seats on the city council to twenty-eight percent by the war's end. The

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<sup>18</sup> Mary A. Miller to Helen Blanche, Book 48, pg. 98, SCA; Mary Miller to W.B. Waddell, Book 49, 153, SCA.; *Avalanche*, March 15, 1861.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*; Young, *Standard History of Memphis*, 533-534.

disruptions of war killed, displaced, or ruined many of the men who controlled the city in 1860. While some returned to the city and resumed their old economic activities, they did not reclaim control of city affairs. For a time, the Arnell Franchise Bill barred ex-Confederates from participating in municipal or state government. This insured control of the city government remained in the hands of small shopkeepers, lawyers, and saloon operators, a trend that persisted well into the 1870s.<sup>20</sup>

The men who took control of Memphis government after the Civil War also happened to be those with the strongest economic ties to vice. Richard Tansey, in his study of prostitution in antebellum New Orleans, found a coalition of lawyers, landlords, shopkeepers, saloon proprietors, stable operators, and politicians formed “prostitution cliques” that supported harlotry in the Crescent City. Similar cliques existed in Memphis. Landlords, furniture dealers, lawyers, saloon operators, small grocers, and stable operators supported prostitution in the Bluff City. Throughout the remainder of the 1860s and into the 1870s, these men made business ties with prostitutes, strengthening and expanding the sex trade through legal assistance and defeating attempts at controlling the spread of vice. Members of the municipal council defeated moral reforms that harmed their lucrative business ties with madams while lawyers and sheriffs used the courts to protect prostitution. Nearly twenty percent of those who rented properties to madams held office as city or county officials, including aldermen, sheriffs, and a city recorder. Madams may have built a “businesswoman's network” in Memphis, but it existed and thrived because the men in power supported it.<sup>21</sup>

The largest group of men and women who rented to prostitutes came from the class of

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<sup>20</sup> Kathleen Berkeley, “‘Like a Plague of Locust:’ Immigration and Social Change in Memphis, Tennessee, 1850-1880,” (University of California, 1980) 298-299.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Tansey, “Prostitution and Politics in Antebellum New Orleans,” in Nancy F. Cott, ed., *History of Women in the United States, Volume 9: Prostitution* (K.G. Saur Verlag GmbH & Co, 1993), 45-75.

petty bourgeois shopkeepers: small merchants and skilled tradesmen such as grocers, barbers, tailors, and saloon operators. These individuals made business connections with madams to supplement their modest incomes. Grocers and small merchants rented rooms above their establishments to sex workers. Grocers W.B. Knight and John Lenard rented apartments to prostitutes in the late 1860s and early 1870s, as did W.F. Goodyear a bonnet bleacher and hat maker. For merchants and artisans such as these, renting to madams represented an important source of income that made the difference between closing their shops or remaining in business. For other small merchants and artisans, sexual commerce fit neatly into their “legitimate” trades. For barber Joseph Lipari, prostitution supported the operation of his tonsorial parlor, known as the “Garibaldi,” that catered exclusively to men. As a site of male socialization, barber shops provided a logical location for sex workers to ply their trade. In 1865, Lipari leased the floor above his shop at 67 Jefferson Street to Rose Lovejoy and her boarders for five years. The brothel housed white and black sex workers, a rare attraction for a tonsorial parlor.<sup>22</sup>

Operators of livery stables, hacks, and omnibus lines relied on the patronage of prostitutes, but also of steamboat men and tourists seeking transportation to the city's brothels. Edward Stack, a livery stable operator who also raced horses – a favorite pastime of the “fast youth” of Memphis – rented three properties on Washington Street near Second for the use of prostitutes. The police cited T.J. Cogswell, the operator of a livery stable and wagon yard, for renting his yard to a “person of ill-fame” in 1857. Wagon yards provided accommodations for people traveling by wagon and often hosted countrymen visiting Memphis to conduct business. These crude lots – similar to a modern day truck stop or motel – came to be associated with

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<sup>22</sup> *Appeal*, September 13, 1867, March 6, 1871; Memphis Recorder Docket, 1861-1862, January 7, 1862; Joseph Lipari to Rose Lovejoy, Book 56, pg. 328, SCA: In a piece in the *Public Ledger*, September 2, 1868, Joseph Lipari alluded to one of his personal enemies (Mike Perald) sleeping with a “mulatto woman” who worked at the brothel above his tonsorial parlor.



disorderly behavior and vice, including gambling, cockfighting and bawdy entertainments. Cogswell may have retained the services of a sex worker as a means of making extra money from traveling countrymen. Hack drivers, who often worked for livery stables or bus companies, also counted women of ill-fame among their most important patrons. The economic ties between prostitution and hack driving proved so strong that Memphians considered the “hack-driving world” an adjunct of the sex trade. The recorder frequently fined hackmen for conveying sex workers around town and even soliciting customers on their behalf. In late 1865, the *Avalanche* complained of long lines of hacks parked on Court Square that solicited business for brothels throughout the city. The working relationships prostitutes developed with hackmen, however, could become quite explosive. Sex worker Alice Sherman severely stabbed hack driver Thomas Conroy with a bowie knife during an argument over Sherman's refusal to pay monies owed for travel.<sup>23</sup>

Madams and hackmen also allied with saloon operators. Saloon operators worked more closely with the sex trade than other merchants in the city for a variety of reasons. Chiefly, saloons served as sites where prostitutes mingled with men. Customers referred to sex workers who worked in saloons as “beer jerkers” or “polite and attentive lady waiters.” Saloons employed these women as servers, but they primarily worked as prostitutes. The most infamous and disorderly saloons in the city, such as the Cotton Plant, built into the basement of the “Temple of Virtue” at the intersection of Main and Washington, employed such women. These prostitutes occupied a lower rung than women who worked in parlor houses and suffered more

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<sup>23</sup> *Public Ledger*, October 11, 1867; *Appeal* August 5, 1875, April 16, 1878, September 2, 1881; Memphis Recorder Docket, July 29, 1857; Joan Luxenburg and Lloyd Klein, “CB Radio Prostitution: Technology and the Displacement of Deviance,” in Sol Chaneles, ed., *Gender Issues, Sex Offenses, and Criminal Justice* (Haworth Press, 1984), 71-87; *Avalanche*, March 28, 1861.

frequent violent attacks.<sup>24</sup>

Saloon operators also built brothels into their establishments. D.W. Davenport, who operated a saloon at 44 Washington Street, rented rooms above his establishment for the use of sex workers. Davenport provided side and back doors for discreet entry into the premises, but the operation of the house appeared anything but discreet to his neighbors. Locals complained of women undressing themselves in unshaded windows, “the gas being turned full on” and well-known patrons clearly visible through open blinds. A police raid on his establishment found “a woman undressed & in bed, and the man under the bed, the woman being a well-known prostitute” named Sarah Flynn. When prosecuted for renting his establishment to women of ill-fame, Davenport claimed his competitors had set out to tar his good name. In an interesting twist, Recorder William L. Duff, the magistrate who fined Davenport and ordered him to abate the nuisance, rented 34 Gayoso Street, the “Mansion House” to a number of madams throughout the 1870s and 1880s.<sup>25</sup>

Parlor house prostitution, hack driving, and liquor retailing existed in a symbiotic relationship. Brothel inmates hired hacks and parked outside of saloons, where they ordered drinks in their carriages. Thus parked, the women socialized with male patrons and arranged for sexual encounters at their places of lodging. This practice attracted the attention of moral reformers. In 1877 alderman J.W. Cochran drafted an ordinance making it a crime to “ride or walk the streets or other public places of the city in company with any public prostitute” or to “wait upon or furnish any prostitute or woman of ill-fame, while riding in any public conveyance in this city, with liquors of any kind.” Cochran, a cottonseed oil manufacturer, represented the 8<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Appeal*, September 12, 1867.

<sup>25</sup> D.W. Davenport v. City of Memphis, 1878, Tennessee Supreme Court Cases, Tennessee State Library and Archives; Annie Cook probate record, 1878-03231, SCA.

Ward, the wealthy suburbs of the city. His proposed ordinance fined offenders up to twenty-five dollars. However, saloon operators wielded considerable influence over municipal government following the Civil War, as evidenced by a successful 1868 campaign by saloon keepers to oppose a saloon tax. In 1877, one fifth of the municipal council consisted of saloon keepers. Through their influence, the ordinance banning saloons from furnishing liquor to prostitutes failed to pass.<sup>26</sup>

Furniture merchants, who rivaled saloon operators in their links to prostitution, played a key role in protecting and promoting prostitution in the city. Usually as the largest creditors of madams, furniture purveyors had a vested interest in keeping brothels open for business. Between 1860 and 1880, madams bought over \$23,062 in furniture and décor from Memphis furniture companies. Madams purchased ninety percent of this figure from the firm Mitchell, Hoffman & Company. Memphis was not unique in this respect. In New York and the cities of the northeast, strong links existed between prostitution and furniture retailing. One northeastern reform journal commented that “in the rent of houses, in the supply of furniture, and in various ways, there is a vast capital employed in the traffic of degraded females.” The figures for Memphis indicate the interdependence of prostitution and furniture retailing. A whopping forty percent of extant warranty deeds and mortgages made between the three largest Memphis furniture companies and customers come from sales made by salesmen to brothel operators. Brothel patronage accounts for nearly ninety percent of extant sales documentation for Mitchell, Hoffman & Co., fifty percent for McKinney & Co., and eleven percent for Ames, Beattie & Jones. This indicates the importance of brothel decorating to the success of furniture retailers. It also indicates that madams, unlike most customers, frequently purchased large amounts of

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<sup>26</sup> *Appeal*, May 8, 1877; *Public Ledger*, July 14, 1877.

furniture on credit. The frequency with which furniture merchants sold large bedroom and parlor suites to madams on credit indicates the profitability of the sex trade, particularly for the merchants who serviced it. In addition, by putting up bond in court cases and serving as security for madams, firms like Mitchell, Hoffman & Co. and McKinney & Co. protected their commercial investment in the sex trade. Furniture dealers also acted as executors for several madams in the 1870s and 80s, further underscoring the ties between the two industries. One madam, Rosalie Pavid, married a furniture and piano salesman.<sup>27</sup>

Lawyers worked to protect prostitution cliques by providing legal services to sex workers and individuals who sheltered them. Developing a business relationship with a capable attorney proved essential for a madam's success. Attorneys arranged bond for madams and played an important role in writing leases and other legal contracts. Memphis madams counted particularly elite lawyers among their advisors. Attorney-General John F. Sale acted as legal advisor for Mary A. Miller in her 1861 brothel lease to Helen Blanche. Hiram Vollentine, who also served as a city alderman, represented madam Nancy McGinnis and assisted Jennie Taylor in repealing a city ordinance banning streetwalking. Because sex work existed in a legal gray area, madams became particularly important clients for those in the legal profession. As a consequence, madams frequently found themselves indebted to lawyers in large amounts. Offering legal services did not always stem from mercenary considerations, though: lawyers who defended madams and landlords often worked to protect their favorite houses of pleasure. When Charles Waters, a black carpenter went to court for renting the "Temple of Virtue" at the corner of Main and Washington,

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<sup>27</sup> F. Kropp to Pauline Barclay, Book 123, pg. 151; Fannie Gray to George F. Rowe & F. Kropp, Book 55 pg. 437, Book 64, pg. 345; Nannie McGinnis to George F. Rowe, Book 57, pg. 356; Elizabeth Whitters to F. Kropp, Book 60, pg. 284; Eliza Goodrich to George F. Rowe & F. Kropp, Book 65, pg. 224, Book 60, pg. 459, Book 55, pg. 501, Book 59, pg. 7; Maggie Mitchell to Phil Allen, Book 41, pg. 622; Julia Clifford to Ames, Beattie & Jones, Book 66, pg. 180; Lydia Stewart to F. Kropp, Book 64, pg. 316, Book 60, pg. 439, SCA; Pauline Livingstone probate record, 1880-05444; Susan Powell probate 1876-02631, SCA; Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 166.

his lawyer asked the prosecuting witness how he could be certain it operated as a house of ill-fame. “I believe so, because I see such men as you go there,” came the reply, eliciting laughter from the courtroom.<sup>28</sup>

Lawyers' services at times extended beyond legal work. Mattie Jackson, known also as Blanche Curry, relied on P.M. Winters for not just legal services, but also advice and management of her business affairs and maintenance of law and order in and around her premises. Although a family man, Winters may also have carried on an extra-marital affair with Jackson. Between 1885 and 1889, Winters defended Jackson in five cases before the criminal court, prosecuted boarder Effie Warner for trespass, and an unnamed “white man” for theft. Winters also worked to abate “nuisances” on Market Square, where at least three other brothels stood, a course of action which may have required his experience as a sheriff during Union occupation. For four years of legal services, advice, and assistance, Winters billed Jackson \$255.00, a small sum. Legal bills typically exceeded five hundred dollars in many instances. Eliza Goodrich owed attorney E.M. Yerger \$800.00 in fees for much less. Jackson and Winters may have also been united by their shared ethnic background. Both hailed from Ireland and Winters fiercely advocated for Irish independence. During Jackson's year-long trip to Ireland in the late 1880s, Winters attended to “business” at her Market Square house.<sup>29</sup>

In December of 1889 Jackson became bedridden due complications arising from an operation. She lingered on her deathbed for three weeks, long enough to put her affairs in order. Without any family, Jackson appointed Winters as her executor. Winters called on Julius J. DuBose, the judge of the criminal court, to consult with Blanche and draw up a will. Even in

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<sup>28</sup> Mary A. Miller to Helen Blanche, Book 48, pg. 98, SCA; Memphis Recorder Docket, August 7, 1860, SCA; *Public Ledger*, September 22, 1877.

<sup>29</sup> Mattie Jackson probate record, 1880-06262, SCA; Eliza Goodrich to E.M. Yerger, Book 56, pg. 504

death, madams could call on the services of powerful men in the community. Jackson's movable property, supposed to have been worth upwards of \$20,000, went to her sister. The houses on Market Square owned by Jackson caused Winters great difficulty, as no respectable person would dare to live in them. Winters petitioned the probate court for permission to continue renting Jackson's two houses on Market Square to sex workers on the grounds that "it would be difficult if not wholly impossible to rent said premises to a reputable person." The court agreed, giving legal sanction to the leasing of two properties for use as brothels. A significant number of lawyers also rented properties for the use of madams: among them city aldermen such as G.P. Foute and William L. Duff, who also served as the city recorder.<sup>30</sup>

Elite landlords proved less important to protecting prostitution within the city than small merchants and saloon operators, but they did play a significant role. These men (and sometimes women) used their economic clout to transform entire neighborhoods into vice districts. This kind of blockbusting lined their pockets, but outraged middle-class neighbors. Robert Church, the South's "first black millionaire," became a key figure in promoting parlor house prostitution in the Beale-Gayoso district. He accumulated a number of properties along Gayoso, Short Third, and St. Martin Streets throughout the 1880s that at various times housed brothels. Other elite, "respectable," white men rented properties to women of ill-fame. Landlords such as William R. Hunt, a member of the pre-war aristocracy, rented properties to sex workers. Large commission merchants and small manufacturers who speculated in real estate, men like J.W. Avery, C.A. Stillman, and David Pante, also provided rooms to sex workers. Stillman owned at least eight different dwelling houses on Poplar, Fourth, and Monroe Streets. Two of these, newly-built two-

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<sup>30</sup> *Appeal*, January 9, 1889; Mattie Jackson probate record, 1880-06262, SCA. Judge DuBose was later the recipient of a petition from the black community requesting that prostitution be stamped out in their midst. In 1887 he attacked Taxing District President Hadden for openly taxing houses of ill-fame. See *Crisis and Commission*, 137.

story brick houses on the corner of Fourth and Poplar, he rented to Nannie McGinnis and Kate Stoner. In many cases, these individuals rented to madams through a rental agent, an intermediary who protected landlords from legal action. In instances where landlords dealt directly with madams, attorneys carefully worded leases so as to shield clients from prosecution. Hunt, a respected gentleman who dwelt in an elegant manse on Beale, leased a two-story brick house on Gayoso Street to madam Emma Piquet in 1860. The itemized lease included a number of provisions intended to protect Hunt, including one that prohibited gambling, disorderly conduct, and “receiving a woman or women” in the house. Hunt certainly knew Piquet's reputation: he demanded fifty dollars per month, plus an additional \$900 for the first month. Hunt may have required such a sum up front as a means of ensuring Piquet's good behavior.<sup>31</sup>

Six widows made up part of this landlord class. One of these, Mary Babb, was among the elite of Memphis society. Babb owned \$70,000 in real estate and rented one of her South Memphis houses to a succession of madams. Most widowed property holders had more modest holdings, such as Mary Healy, who lived in the first ward and owned \$15,000 in real estate. A significant number of madams claimed to be widows or had been abandoned by their husbands, and widows may have sympathized with prostitutes out of a shared sense of loss or bereavement. Widowed landladies may have viewed renting to prostitutes as a means of relieving other widows' pecuniary difficulties.<sup>32</sup>

The opponents of organized vice came primarily from the *haute bourgeoisie*:

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<sup>31</sup> CA Stillman to C. Spiegel, Book 66, pg. 97, Book 66, pg. 94, SCA; William R. Hunt to Emma Picket, Book 44, pg. 579, SCA; For an in-depth look at Robert R. Church's involvement in the sex trade, see Preston Lauterbach's, *Beale Street Dynasty*.

<sup>32</sup> *Appeal*, May 18, 1871; 1870 United States Federal Census, Ward 8, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee, 58. Over thirty property records connected to Mary Babb exist in the Shelby County Archives. For a property used as an assignation house, see Mary Babb to Elizabeth Wildberger, Quit Claim, Book 274, pg. 574. For other properties owned by Mary Babb see Mary Babb to City Land Co., Book 303, pg. 323, Mary Babb to Charlotte M Smith, Book 361, pg. 516, SCA. *passim*. Notably, Mary Babb's late husband was a Quaker.

manufacturers and commission merchants (see Table 2). White collar employees of cotton firms, wholesale merchants, and others who aspired to middle class respectability, including some small progressive retailers, artisans, and at least one saloon operator allied with them. In addition, ministers and evangelicals of various denominations joined this group. This diverse coalition of reform-minded Memphians opposed prostitution for a variety of reasons. Manufacturing interests sought to uphold labor discipline among workers and to protect property values. Bourgeois reformers in Memphis often demanded that prostitutes be “taken up and made to work” in a work-house, illustrating that middle-class observers saw prostitutes as the polar opposite of the industrious, disciplined laborer. Middle-class reformers believed prostitutes should be put to work in beating hemp or some other menial work. A sermon printed in the *Appeal* called on the churches of Memphis to build a cotton mill “which may give employment to women and children,” so that “vice will veil its face, while industry inculcates lessons as invaluable as those that fell from the lips of our savior.” Prostitutes and vice not only bred disorder among workers, they held out the possibility of living by means other than thrift and honest toil. The gambler and prostitute represented a world almost totally at odds with the rising bourgeois social order. If only lewd women could be taught industry, reformers believed, they could be redeemed.<sup>33</sup>

Cotton factors and wholesale grocers, whose livelihoods depended upon trade with planters in the hinterlands, stood divided on the subject of prostitution. A minority provided housing to madams and feted their business partners in houses of ill-fame, but most cotton factors sought to protect property values in areas where they lived and kept offices. As the commercial elite of the city, factors worked to transform the image of Memphis from a rough river town to a bustling commercial center. In 1873, four cotton factor firms petitioned the city to

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<sup>33</sup> *Appeal*, October 22, 1858, March 23, 1871.



remove a bagnio known as the “Germania House” from the corner of Gayoso and Front. The establishment created an “intolerable nuisance,” in part because it stood in the wholesale grocery district where respectable people congregated. Brothels discouraged the establishment of commercial houses frequented by respectable people, which harmed the economic life of the city. White collar employees of cotton factors such as clerks and bookkeepers also signed onto petitions opposing vice, and they may have done so at their employer's behest. Other white collar employees undoubtedly embraced the middle-class ethos of self-control and respectability. Taking a stand against organized vice placed white collar workers publicly alongside their social superiors, broadcasting their acceptance of bourgeois ideals. White collar workers who owned property in areas near brothels also signed petitions requesting their removal, which suggests that at least some of this group opposed prostitution in their neighborhoods for economic reasons.<sup>34</sup>

A small number of progressive merchants who sought to domesticate retail districts in the hope of attracting a growing clientele of middle-class and elite women also opposed vice interests in the city. Operators of “ladies’ tea rooms,” confectioners, and at least one hotelier made up this group. Joseph Specht operated a respectable ice cream saloon that catered to women and families on Madison Street. Specht's advertisements presented his establishments, an oyster saloon and an ice cream parlor, as rarities in the masculine-dominated terrain of Memphis. Specht's daughter later became active in rescuing Memphis sex workers from houses of ill-fame. These merchants, along with cotton factors, wished to transform the rough river town into an orderly, middle-class commercial center.<sup>35</sup>

Although this made for a powerful alliance that at times challenged the economic and social status quo in Memphis, the opponents of prostitution never successfully banished

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<sup>34</sup> *Appeal*, April 3, 1873; *Ledger*, April 11, 1873. See also *Appeal*, June 11, 1858.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, April 27, 1870, June 15, 1881.

prostitutes from public spaces in the nineteenth century. Traditionally pro-vice elements, particularly saloon operators, small shopkeepers, lawyers, and landlords remained dominant in Memphis throughout the nineteenth century, ensuring the central place of prostitution in the city's landscape.

Table 2 Supporters and Opponents of Prostitution in Memphis: 1857-1900<sup>36</sup>

Profession	Pro-Prostitution	Anti-Prostitution
Saloon Operators	6	1
Lawyers	8	2
Manufacturers	2	5
Cotton Factors/Commission Merchants	3	9
Retail Merchants	7	2
Livery Stables	3	-
Artisans/Skilled Tradesmen	6	2
Bookkeepers/Clerks	-	4
Physicians	1	1
Planters/Gentlemen		1
Hoteliers	-	1
Widowed Property holders	6	-
Unknown	4	9

<sup>36</sup> These numbers are derived from various sources. Pro numbers are largely taken from arrest, court, and property records, but also from voting records on the city council. Anti numbers are taken from a variety of petitions, voting records, and membership in the Women's Christian Association.

## Establishing and Operating a Brothel

Establishing a brothel required capital. Sex workers rarely obtained bank loans when starting out. Rather than acquire loans through institutional channels, most relied on money they had saved or obtained on lenient terms of credit from other women and male acquaintances. Some aspiring madams raised start-up capital with money saved through turning tricks or in selling personal possessions. Madeleine Blair, who established her first brothel in Canada, pawned jewelry to raise part of the capital necessary to buy a house, obtaining the rest from a male friend. Mary Miller, who attracted an elite clientele before the Civil War, probably obtained necessary capital from her male friends. Miller also owned a home, left by her deceased husband, which she used as collateral. In 1867 Rosalie Pavid turned to Elias Keck, the operator of a livery stable and omnibus line, for a loan of an unspecified amount. Loans between madams appear to have been less common. When madams granted loans to established or aspiring madams, they did not offer lenient terms. In 1866, Mary Kane obtained a thousand-dollar loan from Fannie Gray, a loan which Gray required her to repay after three months. Only one instance of a madam turning to institutional lines of credit has been found, that of Maggie Britton, a thirty-year veteran of the Memphis sex trade. In the 1890s, after nearly two decades of success as a brothel operator, Britton purpose-built two brothels on the North side of Gayoso Street at a total cost of over ten thousand dollars. For the purchase of the properties, Britton obtained a loan from the House Building and Loan Association of Bloomington Indiana in the amount of three thousand dollars. L.D. Grant, a Memphis contractor, build the frame houses for seven thousand dollars.<sup>37</sup>

Most aspiring madams could not count on large loans from banks, savings & loan

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<sup>37</sup> *Madeleine*, 256; *1859 Tanner Directory for Memphis*, 124; Rosalie Pavid to Elias Keck, Book 61, page 72, SCA; Mary Kane to Fannie Gray, Book 58, pg. 61, SCA; National Home & Building & Loan to Maggie Britton, Book 245, pg. 123, SCA

institutions, or other brothel operators. These women turned to much cheaper rental properties rather than elegant, purpose-built brothels as their initial bases of operation. As has been alluded to before, a coterie of landlords large and small catered to sex workers. A prospective operator in search of a place to open shop found an array of available properties in the city papers. Landlords willing to rent to women of ill-fame did not advertise openly for brothels. Instead, they typically presented their properties as suitable for use as boarding houses or stores. Ed Stack, a small landlord and livery operator, advertised 191 Second Street as “7 rooms, suitable for a grocery or boardinghouse.” Advertisements for 100 – 104 Fourth Street, houses used as brothels in the 1870s and 1880s, read simply “DWELLINGS – 2-story brick, 11 rooms.” Once these properties had developed reputations as places of ill-fame, owners encountered difficulty in renting them to anyone other than sex workers.<sup>38</sup>

Even landlords that specifically advertised for respectable boarders turned to discreet women of pleasure. William L. Duff, owner of the “Almedia Hotel” at Number 34 Gayoso, initially catered to families and required references from “unknown parties.” Between 1874 and 1876, however, Duff began renting his rooms to sex workers, and by 1878 he leased the entire building for use as a whorehouse known as the “Mansion House.” Prostitutes learned of the availability of these houses through informal networks or by reputation. Rents varied, but they generally ranged from twenty to \$150 per month, and in some instances reached as high as \$500 per month. A madam could rent a house for a middle-class establishment for fifty dollars a month. A higher class brothel operator paid between \$100 and \$150. The rare higher end rents typically did not persist for long periods of time. Mary Miller's “Iron Clad” rented for \$500 prior to the Civil War, but by war's end the owner partitioned it into at least two brothels, one renting

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<sup>38</sup> *Appeal*, August 31, 1881, October 29, 1876.

for only forty dollars a month. Memphis could not support large numbers of opulent, high dollar whorehouses, meaning those which charged twenty dollars or more per customer. Middling and working class men became the primary customer of Memphis madams.<sup>39</sup>

Other madams took over brothels that had already been established. This required less start-up capital and reduced overhead. Nell Kimball opened her first house in New Orleans by taking over the lease on a furnished property used as a gambling parlor and brothel. The police closed the house after authorities discovered card sharps operating out of the establishment. For Kimball, one madam's misfortune proved a boon. This appears to have been a common occurrence in Memphis. While no specific examples of women inheriting the control of brothels has been found in Memphis, data indicates that madams moved frequently out of and within the city, leaving control of an establishment in the hands of new management. Madams moved from place to place almost as frequently as average prostitutes. Patterns of brothel management indicate many madams moved to new locations in Memphis every two to three years. Some movement resulted from upward mobility; as madams prospered they sought out better places of business. Others may have moved for reasons of financial difficulty, such as being unable to pay rent. Many undoubtedly moved because they had run afoul of the law or lost police protection.<sup>40</sup>

A handful of women simply “graduated” to the role of madam. Housekeepers, a class of sex worker employed by madams to manage brothel affairs – a sort of prostitution middle manager – at times received promotion to the status of madam by inheriting control or buying

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<sup>39</sup> Annie Cook probate record, 1878-03231, SCA; Pauline Livingstone probate record, 1880-05444, SCA; Mary A. Miller to Helen Blanche, Book 48, pg. 98; *Appeal*, May 6, 1874.

<sup>40</sup> Nell Kimball, *Nell Kimball: Her Life as an American Madam*, 190; The frequent movement of madams throughout the city is found in city directories. I tracked six locations within Memphis over a thirty-year period and found that brothel management changed frequently, with madams moving between different locations within the city. Madams would manage one house, move to another, and then return to their original place years later. On average, brothels in Memphis were managed by four different women between the Civil War and the middle of the 1890s.

out the woman who employed them. Housekeepers usually worked in the sex trade for several years and possessed the skills necessary to act as a madam's lieutenant. They performed a variety of jobs within the parlor house, with their main jobs being the maintenance of discipline among the boarders, protecting the linens, and keeping the liquor supply under lock and key. Some housekeepers offered sexual services in addition to receiving pay from a madam. The promotion of housekeepers to madams at times occurred simply because a madam sought to move to another location, whether to vacation, leave the trade, or escape prosecution. In her autobiography, Madeleine Blair records leaving her brothel, the "Windsor Club" in the control of her housekeeper, Mildred. No specific examples of this have been found in Memphis, but evidence of madams moving frequently make it very likely.<sup>41</sup>

A madam's means, as well as local custom, limited choices for the location of a brothel. Apart from before the Civil War, when the city had not yet established informal vice districts, madams had to limit their operations to certain areas to avoid the ire of locals. Even in those areas, brothels still angered local residents. Although virtually every neighborhood in the city had a saloon where prostitutes worked or unscrupulous landlords kept hot sheet hotels, parlor houses abounded in four localities. Most brothels tended to huddle around areas where men worked: cotton and lumberyards in particular attracted whorehouses, but they also stood in entertainment districts. Usually, areas where men worked and played blurred together, with lumberyards across the street from rookeries and dives.

Pinch, a working class slum inhabited by Irish immigrants and large numbers of freedmen after the Civil War, became the first locus of prostitution. Market Square, along with Winchester Street which bounded it on the northern side, became the center of sex work in this neighborhood

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<sup>41</sup> Jeffrey D. Nichols, *Prostitution, Polygamy, and Power: Salt Lake City, 1847-1918* (University of Illinois Press, 2002), 62; *Madeleine*, 318.

between the late 1860s and the end of the 1890s. On the park-like Market Square stood three frame house bagnios and one block west stood two brothels on Winchester, including the infamous “Iron Clad.” Madams such as Mary Kane, Pauline Livingstone, Blanche Curry, and Nettie White operated houses in this area. Success in Pinch could lead to upper mobility for an ambitious madam.<sup>42</sup>

Three blocks South, the Washington Street entertainment district between Main and Second attracted a diverse, but predominantly working class clientele. The *Appeal* referred to this area as the “Five Points” of Memphis, a reputation it earned from its vice and violence. The center of plebeian entertainment in the city, this district offered a variety of “burnt cork” theaters, saloons, and rooms rented by the hour to Johns. The “Temple of Virtue” which stood on the southeast corner of Main and Second, developed into the dominant resort of pleasure in this district. Landlords rented the upper floors of this building to lower class prostitutes such as the “Great Eastern,” so-called because of her “immense size.” A handful of working-class brothels also operated in this district – some of the worst in the city -- where copious amounts of oil cloth kept hasty customers from ruining carpet and beds with their mud-caked boots. Madams who worked this area had a lower chance of upward mobility. This district lost its reputation as a center of lower class bawdy entertainment by the middle of the 1880s when an outcry from nearby homeowners pushed out the rookeries and bagnios.<sup>43</sup>

Further south, a stretch of Gayoso Street from Front Row to DeSoto offered a diverse assortment of elite and lower class houses. Just below the retail and wholesale districts and adjacent to lumber yards, this area served the sexual demands of men from all walks of life.

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<sup>42</sup> Mapping these districts was a process that involved consulting newspapers, census and probate records, city directories, and Sanborn maps. Special thanks to Jennifer Tucker, manager of the Mallory-Neely House, for providing Sanborn maps of Memphis between 1888 and 1907.

<sup>43</sup> *Appeal*, October 15, 1867, June 22, 1868.

Wealthy men patronized the “Mansion House” within sight of Robert Church's saloon and billiard hall while working and middle-class men frequented houses that followed the meandering path of the bayou beyond Third Street. Gayoso Street also linked two black entertainment districts known as “Rotten Row” and “Hell's Half Acre.” By the turn of the century, Gayoso between Hernando and DeSoto developed into a neighborhood of white and black whorehouses. The city's best known madams operated here: Annie Cook, Grace Stanley, Blanche McGhee, and Maggie Britton. These well-known elite madams have overshadowed the activities of more common whorehouse operators like Sarah Gaynor, who operated a dancehall and “shebang” at the corner of Gayoso and Desoto.<sup>44</sup>

Well below Beale, in what is known today as the South Main Arts District, another collection of brothels huddled near the intersection of Huling and Main near cotton yards and massive cotton sheds. Prior to and during the Civil War, at least two houses stood in this neighborhood, then taking advantage of rail travelers. In the 1880s, this district developed into a group of four disreputable houses. A collection of small-time operators, the most notable being Rosalie Pavid (known also as Lou Morris or “French Lou”) and Alice Grant, kept houses in this area.<sup>45</sup>

After obtaining a house in one of these informal red light districts, operators turned to furnishings. “Furnishing a sporting house,” Nell Kimball wrote in her memoirs, “called for some sense and a lot of feeling for the customer's comfort, habits and little tricks.” Even previously furnished houses required the purchasing of odds and ends: linens, chairs, paintings, rugs, and tableware, all of which madams bought with an eye to enhancing comfort, and by extension, the

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<sup>44</sup> For more on this district, see Preston Lauterbach's *Beale Street Dynasty*.

<sup>45</sup> Sanborn-Perris Map Company, *Fire Insurance Maps for Memphis, Tennessee* for 1887; 1860 United States Federal Census, Ward 6, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee, 156.



fee sex workers could demand. Items such as linens and dishes served a utilitarian purpose, but décor served to add to the mystique of the experience of visiting a brothel. Men paid not just for sex, but elegant surroundings that married domesticity with the exotic. A good madam realized that “the difference between a two dollar hooker and the fifty dollar tart is just the surroundings and a myth.”<sup>46</sup>

Mythmaking required an initial investment of \$1,500 to \$4,000. This included quotidian considerations, such as kitchenware, dishes, linens, bedsteads and coal for heating stoves, as well as more specialized luxury items integral to the operation of brothels such as pianos. Furniture, usually bought on credit, made up three quarters of the initial investment. When Eliza Goodrich opened a small brothel on Main Street in 1866, mahogany furniture for four rooms and a parlor cost nearly eighteen hundred dollars. Elizabeth Whitters spent \$2,063 on carpeting, curtains, and a small set of mahogany parlor furniture. Expensive wood like mahogany and rosewood projected an atmosphere of elegance and wealth, transforming a mundane room above a dry goods store into a palace. Madams who could not afford expensive materials turned to imitation woods or opted for cheaper materials.<sup>47</sup>

Madams first turned their attention to furnishing the parlor. The name “parlor house” derived from the often elaborately decorated parlors where sex workers entertained customers. The term underscores the importance of the parlor to what went on in middling and elite brothels: not simply places where men and women had sex, but places where women entertained male guests. The goal of a successful parlor house “was to convey a feeling to the customer that he was an honored guest in the home of a close friend.” In addition to female company, the parlor offered plush seating, the tinkling of a piano (and sometimes a banjo), wine, whiskey,

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<sup>46</sup> Kimball, *Nell Kimball*, 3, 252.

<sup>47</sup> Eliza Goodrich to George F. Rowe, Book 59, pg. 7, SCA; Elizabeth Whitters to F. Kropp, Book 60, pg. 284, SCA.

champagne, and cigars. Brothel operators evinced pride in providing the best whisky, fine cigars, and excellent food in an elegant setting. Zig Flegel, a St. Louis brothel operator, remarked that “when the good whorehouse goes, culture goes out of fine American living.”<sup>48</sup>

The sort of “fine American living” one could expect depended upon the social class of the customer. Brothels did not erase social distinctions. Men of rank rarely rubbed elbows with laborers and farmers. Madams of parlor houses strictly maintained the separation of customers along class lines, a fact made most apparent in the arrangement and appointment of parlor space. Pauline Livingstone's “Iron Clad” featured two parlors that catered to two separate classes of men. The upper parlor received high-paying customers, wealthy and middle-class men who paid for more elegant surroundings. A piano presided over the upper parlor, where two sofas and armchairs gathered around a fireplace. Silver waiters, silver plated tableware, and glass cake stands offered sweets, pickles, and other viands such as oysters. Porcelain, alabaster, and crystal vases decorated the side tables along with “fancy” photographs and “Chinese ornaments.” In addition, “fine” chandeliers illuminated the room. The plush upper parlor, decorated with a myriad of beautiful and exotic objects, and featuring elegantly served foodstuffs, closely replicated the homey, eclectic atmosphere of a middle-class Victorian parlor. The lower parlor of the “Iron Clad” appeared considerably more threadbare. Here, remnant rugs decorated the floor around a fireplace where customers sat in worn out parlor chairs and common cane seat chairs. Bright scarlet window shades, the only indication to passersby of what went on inside, covered the windows. Unlike the upper parlor, madams provided spittoons for working-class and yeomen clients who chewed tobacco. A few prints decorated the walls and a chandelier, a fine extension

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<sup>48</sup> Gordon Morris Bakken and Brenda Farrington, *Encyclopedia of Women in the American West*, (Sage Publications, 2003), 243; Kimball, 89.

table, and a mantle mirror presented the only touches of elegance.<sup>49</sup>

Not all madams could offer even this level of style. Women like Sarah Gaynor, who kept a dancehall and brothel, occupied the bottom rung of the brothel hierarchy. Gaynor first appeared in Memphis in 1867. Evidently educated and possessed of a “superior intellect,” she may have been a war widow. Over the next five years she became a fixture of “Hell’s Half Acre,” a lower class vice district at the intersection of Gayoso and Desoto Streets. On the southeast corner of the city’s most disreputable intersection, Gaynor built a shanty on land leased from John Cannavan, a structure contemporaries described as a “shebang.” The “Calico Ball,” an informal dance given on the premises at which women wore calico dresses, became Gaynor’s stock-in-trade. These dances presented occasions for selling sexual services and they appear to have been frequently disorderly and interracial. Gaynor boarded an indeterminate number of women “of all colors” from among the lowest stratum of sex workers in an arrangement that bears more resemblance to a boardinghouse than a parlor house.<sup>50</sup>

Unlike houses a few blocks east or uptown, Gaynor’s house offered no elegant touches. A visitor to Gaynor’s “shebang” found a labyrinthine conglomeration of ramshackle “nooks” where women roomed, often along with children. Her parlor consisted of little more than a ruined sofa and two cane seat chairs. Boarders slept on pallets on the floor. One unnamed roomer lived with several sickly children who “crouched around” without fire, furniture, or clothing. In a scene worthy of William Hogarth, an *Appeal* reporter found the mistress of this miserable fiefdom in her kitchen cooking bacon over a “rusty stove” while nursing a “half negro baby.” A pregnant twelve-year old boarded in Gaynor’s establishment. “She was capable of almost any depth of depravity,” the *Appeal* wrote of Gaynor, “and yet she watched over her 'neighbors' those queer

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<sup>49</sup> Pauline Barclay (Livingstone) probate record 1880-05444, SCA.

<sup>50</sup> *Appeal*, February 4, 1868, October 18, 1872; Sarah Gaynor probate record, 1876-01403, SCA.

women, both white and black, with a motherly affection.” Five orphaned children lived with Gaynor in 1872. Her executor numbered an “old crib” among her few possessions. The motherly image assigned to her by the *Appeal*, although tainted in the eyes of middle-class observers by miscegenation and vice, became the defining characteristic of Sarah Gaynor's public image. The Memphis press referred to her as “Mother Gaynor.” Although she failed to live up to the domestic ideal in her comportment and décor, the police and the *Appeal* believed “the continual exercise of her genius” as a caregiver and mother figure preserved a modicum of order in her corner of the city. “The old woman was as full of iniquity as Bismarck is of ambition,” a reporter for the *Appeal* commented, “but she controlled it by the exercise of a superior reason, and made all things within her sphere minister to her will.” As a paper which rarely had anything positive to say about madams, this statement constituted high praise.<sup>51</sup>

While there may have been visible class distinctions in the kinds of décor and materials used, madams considered certain items *de rigueur* in the furnishing of middling and elite brothel parlors. As social spaces, parlor furnishings emphasized comfort, interaction, class-appropriate luxury, entertainment, and display. The parlor wedded domesticity, sex, and diversion in a manner calculated to separate a man from his money. Madams placed parlor chairs, easy chairs, sociables, and sofas in nearly every brothel parlor. Center tables provided spaces for men to play cards or eat small meals. Some madams offered organized gambling in their parlors, which included faro tables and roulette wheels. Parlors also served as spaces where women displayed themselves for selection, a matter reflected in the furniture madams selected. Tete-a-tete chairs in particular became common in brothel parlors; their unique design enabled customers and sex workers to pair off and make arrangements for sexual encounters.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Appeal*, October 18, 1872: Gaynor probate record, SCA.

<sup>52</sup> Furniture and its placement in brothel spaces was determined through examining court records, probate records,

In their furnishings, middling and upper class brothel parlors resembled the formal parlors of middle-class nineteenth century homes, but with an important difference. While “respectable” parlors displayed the learning and morality of residents through the display of scenes from classical antiquity or hand-embroidered passages from Scripture, Madams selected “bawdy” art which heightened the expectation of things to come, but also projected an aura of luxury, and even good taste. This art, if it could be called such, often involved satyrs chasing nymphs or nude statuary of questionable quality. But in some instances madams displayed genuine works of art in their parlors. According to Madeleine Blair, the hall and parlor of one of the best brothels in Chicago doubled as an “art palace” that attracted visitors solely to examine its artistic treasures. While Memphis could not boast such an “art palace,” madams did create lavishly decorated parlor interiors intended to transport guests to another place or to titillate. Affordable steel engravings and chromolithographs, which companies turned out in large numbers by the late nineteenth century, formed the bulk of this décor. Brothel operators also hung oil paintings in their parlor spaces. Fanny Gray and Susan Powell placed statuary and “nude paintings” in their parlors and Annie Cook spent hundreds of dollars on adorning her ceilings and walls with rich wallpaper and hand painted birds. Madams' selection of brothel parlor décor blended domesticity with a lascivious, indulgent sensibility. In the words of Nell Kimball, such décor “gave the guest an idea we weren't a Sunday school.”<sup>53</sup>

Madams also sought to add another symbol of domesticity to their parlors: pianos. These instruments provided an important part of the parlor atmosphere. Music not only set an appropriate background, it often became a site of interaction and socialization between sex workers and guests. By the middle of the nineteenth century, mass production techniques made

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and Sanborn maps.

<sup>53</sup> *Madeleine*, 121; *Appeal*, February 9, 1876; Nell Kimball, 191.

pianos and parlor organs a fixture of middle class homes. Linked with European sophistication, pianos symbolized the status aspirations of middle-class families. For Memphis brothel operators, a piano could imbue their work and living spaces with elegance and taste. Although the music of brothel parlors has been described as “syncopated trash,” Stephen Foster or other parlor songs dominated the musical repertoire of middling and upper class whorehouses in the mid to late nineteenth century. Customers paid to hear and to sing along with sentimental ballads that waxed poetically about the joys of home life. Bawdy songs also accompanied these tunes, juxtaposing sexuality, sentimentality, and domesticity in a manner that modern observers would find strange. Memphis furniture firms Grosvenor, Camp & Co., Mitchell, Hoffman & Co. and musical instrument dealers such as F. Katzenbach & Co. sold pianos to whorehouses on installment plans. In the mid-1860s Mary Kane purchased a Steinway & Sons piano from F. Katzenbach & Co. for \$900, an expensive investment for a madam, but one that attracted customers and increased the fee sex workers could demand.<sup>54</sup>

A young sport strolling down Gayoso Street after dark in the 1880s heard pianos tinkling through the open windows of parlors and saloons between Second Street and Desoto. The labor required to keep up this constant din of music fell to a special class of workers, the so-called “professors.” In some houses the sex workers themselves played piano, a fact which attests to their middle-class origins. But many madams hired musicians from outside the house to keep up a constant flow of background music. Playing piano in a brothel did not offer prestige or respect for professors – madams barred them from contact with sex workers, their pay often consisted solely of tips, and they engaged in labor that few appreciated. Madeleine Blair described the

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<sup>54</sup> Laura Vorachek “‘The Instrument of the Century’: The Piano as an Icon of Female Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century,” *George Eliot - George Henry Lewes Studies* No. 38/39, In Memoriam: Professor Jerome Beaty (1924-2000) (September 2000), 26-43; *Madeleine*, 148; Kimball, 106.

“professor” at a Chicago parlor house as “a harassed-looking middle-aged man who had a family of four children to support.” Early Jazz and Blues performers such as Scott Joplin played in Memphis parlor houses in the late nineteenth century. The “professor” label implied adult males, but at least one adolescent girl, Carrie Brown, a black minor, played piano in a Memphis parlor house in the 1890s. How Brown came to be employed in this capacity is unknown. Madeleine Blair, fearing that a similar fate would befall her children, forbade her sons to learn piano.<sup>55</sup>

R.G. Brockley, a young English pianist, while perhaps not representative of the “Professor” class as a whole, provides a window into the lives of these brothel workers. Brockley arrived in Memphis in the late 1850s armed only with his skills as a pianist. As a musician, Brockley expected to find employment in a city brimming with saloons, gambling halls, and theaters. He initially worked for Grosvenor, Camp & Co. as a piano salesman and provided lessons on the side. But Brockley lost his job after his employers caught him embezzling funds. With his name tarnished by misdeeds, the young Englishman turned to playing in houses of ill-fame, a world he likely knew well through his work as a furniture salesman. Madam Rosalie Pavid, another Memphis newcomer, perhaps taking pity on a fellow immigrant, hired Brockley to play piano in her rough South Street house. But “Professor” Brockley continued to engage in disreputable behavior. In 1861 he stole a watch from Elizabeth Webster, “a woman of the town.” Despite Brockley's criminal proclivities, a relationship between the young piano player and Madam Pavid resulted in marriage. Rosalie gave birth to a daughter sometime between 1862 and the end of 1863. Their marriage did not last long, however. R.G Brockley died in 1863 of unknown causes.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *Madeleine*, 148; *The Southwestern Reporter*, Vol. 36 (St. Paul: West Publishing, 1896), 714.

<sup>56</sup> *Appeal*, April 6, 1860, January 27, 1861; Details of the union between Brockley and Pavid were provided, in part, by Hattie Wilcox, the third great-granddaughter of Rosalie Pavid Brockley; *Elmwood Cemetery Daily Burial Record*, November 3, 1863, SCA.

Madams offered other entertainments beyond music and fellowship in their parlors. Madams occasionally hired fortune-tellers, clairvoyants, and other practitioners of the occult arts to attract customers. Prostitutes, like many of the “lower orders,” frequently participated in lotteries, tarot readings, and visits to conjurers. Sex work and conjure both represented pre-Enlightenment modes of conduct that stood at odds with middle-class notions of rationality and self-control. Before the rise of middle-class self-control and the spread of Enlightenment rationality, Europeans frequently engaged in rituals of chance, magic, and luck. Magic, like raucous indulgence in masculine “jolly” behavior – practical joking, heavy drinking, and frequenting prostitutes – formed part of the old traditional, pre-capitalist order. By the middle of the nineteenth century, conjuring had been pushed to the margins by a Protestant, rationalistic, middle-class ethos, where it continued to flourish alongside sex work.<sup>57</sup>

In Memphis, fortune-telling and conjure retained its traditional potency among former slaves and recent immigrants, particularly the Irish. Disapproving middle-class observers saw a clear connection between prostitution and fortune-telling: it all boiled down to sex. Patrons of fortune-tellers often sought knowledge or occult power to aid them in amorous pursuits. This is seen in an 1863 *Bulletin* advertisement for the services of Madame James, a clairvoyant making her tour of the South. The ad promised that “her manner of telling fortunes and selecting conjugal partners has astonished the most incredulous.” The *Appeal* complained that “fallen women, and men and women who deal in the lottery are the especial patrons of fortune-tellers.”<sup>58</sup>

Not mere superstition, fortune telling constituted a danger to the innocence of youth. It also threatened racial boundaries:

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<sup>57</sup> Jackson Lears, *Something for Nothing: Luck in America* (Viking, 2003), 68

<sup>58</sup> Ibid; *Bulletin*, October 30, 1863.



They [fortune-tellers] are agents and abettors of the wretched class who corrupt youth and betray innocence . . . . We have in Memphis many fortune-tellers who, in a quiet way, ply a triple vocation as procuresses, assignators and consulters of cards. True these are mostly negroes, yet it is also true that their best patrons are sometimes found among white men and women<sup>59</sup>

William Faulkner, who spent time in Memphis brothels in the early twentieth century, linked sex work, race, and superstition in *The Sound and the Fury*. He wrote that “[African Americans] will bet on the odd or even number of mourners at a funeral. A brothel full of them in Memphis went into a religious trance ran naked into the street. It took three policemen to subdue one of them.”<sup>60</sup>

Since conjure women and fortune-tellers worked more among the “lower orders,” they often boarded in middling and working class houses of prostitution. Madame Best, known also as Madame DeSilver, offered her services in Memphis in the late 1870s and 1880s. Her ads in the papers thundered, “KNOW THY DESTINY!” Described as “the greatest seeress of this age,” Best confined her activities solely to houses of ill-repute. During 1879 and 1880, she boarded in three houses of assignation: 560 Main, 65 St. Martin Street, and 63 Winchester, all middling or lower class establishments. Whether or not Best also engaged in sex work remains unclear. Many women of color worked as fortune-tellers and operated “call houses” or houses of assignation. These madams offered a more exotic, transgressive experience to their patrons. Dark Lizzie, a “conjure woman” who ran a house of assignation, quoted Shakespeare and Omar Khayyam to her visitors while Frances (or Francis) Thompson dealt tarot cards in drag.<sup>61</sup>

Men associated with the demimonde also tried their hand at the conjuring business. A

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<sup>59</sup> *Appeal*, September 24, 1871.

<sup>60</sup> William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury in Novels, 1926-1929* (Library of America), 2006, 1008.

<sup>61</sup> *Public Ledger*, December 15, 1880, July 15, 1876, February 7, 1879, March 26, 1880; *Appeal* February 4, 1877; Lee, *Beale Street*, 113-114.

mountebank by the name of Harris, who promoted variety shows and organized several balls for sex workers on Second Street, styled himself as Professor Castrala, “the great Spanish seer.” In a newspaper ad he promised a “correct picture of future husband, or wife; place and time of meeting, and date of marriage. This is no humbug!” Castrala required supplicants to send their age, lock of hair, color of eyes, and twenty-five cents. Police Chief Athy took notice of these advertisements and arrested Castrala for running a scam. What became of Harris is unknown.<sup>62</sup>

The close links between conjuring, prostitution, and swindling should come as no surprise: all of these professions relied on myth and even the suspension of disbelief on the part of customers. Boarding fortune-tellers increased cash flow, but it also lent a mysterious and phantasmagorical atmosphere to a mundane boardinghouse.

While plebeian houses emphasized spiritualism, brothels of all classes offered dining. A striking feature of Memphis parlor houses is the focus on feeding their clients well. Madams sought to satisfy every appetite of their guests, including the gastronomic. Dining formed an important aspect of the domestic image madams sought to project, and is seen in the widespread use of dining tables, high salaries paid to cooks, and remains of rich foods found at brothel sites. More than half of all brothels studied had at least one dining table, while two madams, Nannie McGinnis and Susan Powell, had multiple dining tables. These were often large tables with folding extensions that could seat up to fourteen diners. An array of chafing dishes, silver waiters, and serving dishes found in probate records and trust deeds attests to the practice of entertaining male guests at these tables. Brothel cooks received between one and a half to three times as much per month as chambermaids. Most cooks received twenty to twenty-five dollars per month for their work and some, such as Lucy Conely, did double duty as chambermaids.

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<sup>62</sup> *Appeal*, April 5, 1879.

Women especially skilled in preparing viands could receive two to three times this amount from the elite madams. Susan Powell paid Melissa Williams sixty dollars a month to prepare food at her Madison Street parlor house, a salary that surpassed that of male laborers.<sup>63</sup>

Parlor house madams kept a well-stocked larder, and this is most evident in the widespread consumption of oysters. Esteemed a delicacy and believed to be an aphrodisiac, oysters became the most popular food served in Memphis sporting houses between the Civil War and the turn of the century. An archaeological dig conducted on a brothel site in the Beale Street district in 2007 revealed forty-seven percent of animal remains on the site came from bivalves. This proportion of shellfish is four times higher than in archaeological digs conducted on other brothel sites in the United States. This fits with evidence of oyster consumption found in city papers. Memphians in the nineteenth century expressed a mania for the tiny bivalves. Oyster restaurants dotted the city and attracted a boisterous male clientele, in part because they doubled as groggeries or saloons. These establishments also came to be associated with prostitution. Restaurants in New York's Five Points offered upper rooms where waitresses sold sexual services. If oysters are indeed an aphrodisiac, this must have been an effective business model.<sup>64</sup>

Very few “respectable” oyster saloons existed in Memphis. In 1871 Ada Jones, a boarder at a Washington Street bagnio was killed in the upper room of Angelo Marre's Main Street oyster house. Despite people coming and going from the restaurant, Jones's corpse remained sprawled on the restaurant balcony all night. Unconscious prostitutes became such a common sight in Marre's that the wait staff thought nothing amiss until the following morning when Jones could

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<sup>63</sup> Nancy L. McGinnis to H. Vollentine, Book 44, pg. 96, SCA; Susan Powell probate record, 1876-02631, SCA; Pauline Livingstone probate record, 1880-05444, SCA; Emily Sutton probate record, 1873-01690, SCA.

<sup>64</sup> C. Andrew Buchner, *Archaeological Data Recovery at the Lee's Landing Westin Hotel Site*, 79-80; Cindy R. Lobel, *Urban Appetites: Food & Culture in Nineteenth Century New York* (University of Chicago Press, 2014), 113.

not be roused. The trial testimony from the case, published in the city papers, exposed the seedy side of oyster establishments to the polite classes of Memphis. Responding to the demand from middle-class women for safe and respectable eating establishments, John Gaston opened an oyster restaurant on Court Street that targeted a polite female customer base in 1873. “It can no longer be said that Memphis has no place where ladies can partake of an oyster supper,” Gaston boasted. “No one need hesitate,” he continued, “to take their wives or daughters to this sumptuously furnished oyster saloon.” When reformers attacked sex work they also attacked a gender order that made eating in public places largely a preserve of “public women” and their gallants. Gaston, recognizing this, tapped into the growth of middle-class women's urban recreation. A clientele who spent their day shopping or attending elevating moral entertainments at the New Memphis Theater wanted to be shielded from the indecencies on display in plebeian oyster houses.<sup>65</sup>

Madams do not appear to have provided the same rich fare for their boarders. Susan Powell's estate contained receipts for mundane foodstuffs such as bacon, flour, and coffee, while Sarah Gaynor's boarders subsisted off a diet dominated largely by biscuits, bacon, and potatoes. Except in instances when sex workers ate outside of their houses, or when customers bought meals for women, prostitutes subsisted on a limited diet of bacon, lard, and starchy foods which differed little from that of many working-class people.<sup>66</sup>

Food without drink would have been unbecoming, particularly when drinks proved highly profitable for brothel operators. Many lower class houses doubled as groggeries that served cheap rotgut whiskey by the glass. Middling and elite houses provided a better selection, substituting ale, wine, and champagne for corn liquor. Madams sold drinks at inflated prices and

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<sup>65</sup> *Appeal*, July 12, 1871, November 23, 1873.

<sup>66</sup> Susan Powell probate record, 1876-02631, SCA; Sarah Gaynor probate record, 1876-01403, SCA.

the money made from them went straight into the madam's pocket. Since madams did not split income from drinks with boarders, Madams expected sex workers to “upsell” a bottle of wine or glass of alcohol to customers. Boarders who would not or could not successfully sell drinks to customers did not last long in a parlor house. Generally, madams provided wine and champagne by the bottle, although liquor and beer typically sold by the glass.<sup>67</sup>

Shrewd madams doctored their drinks, either with water to “stretch out” the supply – or in less reputable houses – with soporifics to render customers more pliant. To avoid becoming overly intoxicated and to save money, boarders often drank watered down wine or glasses of tonic water. The cuspidors in nearly every room not only provided men with a place to spit their tobacco, but also for boarders to surreptitiously dispose of their drinks. A bottle of wine quickly disappeared into a spittoon, prompting a customer to purchase a second bottle. Madams worked to prevent their boarders from becoming intoxicated by serving tonic water disguised as gin, but boarders circumvented madams by accepting drinks from customers. To prevent boarders and customers from stealing a draught, madams kept alcohol locked in wine cabinets and safes, entrusting the keys only to their housekeepers.<sup>68</sup>

Madams spent between twelve and sixty-four dollars a month on alcohol. Fannie Walker bought four baskets, or 48 bottles, of Piper-Heidsieck champagne between June and September of 1873 for \$128.00, a sum more than double what most laborers made in two months. In the brothel parlor, a bottle of champagne sold for upwards of ten dollars. Susan Powell purchased two dozen quarts of ale each week from Lords & Diehl for three dollars. Madams squeezed up to six glasses of beer from a quart, serving each one to customers for twenty-five cents. These

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<sup>67</sup> *Madeleine*, 68-69, 309.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*; Spittoons are found in nearly every brothel probate record. See Susan Powell, 1876-02631, SCA. The practice of selling expensive drinks by the glass persisted in Memphis brothels into the 1930s. See W.C. Williams, *Survey of Commercialized Prostitution in Memphis* (Tennessee Health Department, 1938), SCA.

exorbitantly priced glasses of beer enabled a madam to turn a thirty-six dollar profit on a three dollar weekly investment. Customers knew brothels charged high prices for drinks, but they understood this to be part of the extravagance of the whorehouse visit. A Gilded Age “sport” did not shrink from displaying his money.<sup>69</sup>

With décor and provisions for the parlor, kitchen, and dining room secured, a brothel entrepreneur turned to the bedrooms, where according to Nell Kimball, “history is made in a whorehouse.” Some madams, particularly the more elite, designed these spaces to increase the fee their boarders could command. In this respect, they could be little different from parlor spaces. Some madams attempted to carry the elegance of their parlors into the bedrooms with touches such as Chinese lanterns, Japanned curios, or by placing more expensive mahogany furniture, marble-topped tables, easy chairs, and sofas. But in the main, madams did not lavishly decorate their bedrooms. Most featured a bed, bureau, washstand, plain carpeting, and plenty of oil cloth. The presence of multiple cane seat chairs in some rooms suggests these also served as spaces of male social interaction, group sex, and sexual exhibition.<sup>70</sup>

With the exception of a madams’ own quarters, the general lack of decorative items or human touches suggests most brothel bedrooms in the city looked quite plain. This is testament to the nomadic lifestyle of the sex worker, who carried much of her life in a trunk or carpetbag. William Faulkner, who spent time in Memphis brothels in the early twentieth century, may have conjured a particular bedroom for his description of Temple Drake's room in *Sanctuary*. His description conveys a threadbare space:

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<sup>69</sup> Emily Sutton (Fannie Walker) probate record, 1873-01690, SCA; Susan Powell probate record, 1876-02631, SCA; *Madeleine*, 114;

<sup>70</sup> Emily Sutton probate record, 1873-01690, SCA; The presence of as many as six cane seat chairs in some bedrooms suggests sex shows and sexual voyeurism were common features of Memphis brothels. William Faulkner's visits to these houses may have inspired the voyeuristic character of Popeye in *Sanctuary*, who could only obtain sexual pleasure from watching Red and Temple Drake have sexual intercourse.

The light hung from the center of the ceiling, beneath a fluted shade of rose-colored paper browned where the bulb bulged it. The floor was covered by a figured maroon-tinted carpet tacked down in strips; the olive-tinted walls bore two framed lithographs. From the two windows curtains of machine lace hung, dust-colored, like strips of lightly congealed dust set on end. The whole room had an air of musty stoginess, decorum; in the wavy mirror of a cheap varnished dresser, as in a stagnant pool, there seemed to linger spent ghosts of voluptuous gestures and dead lusts. In the corner, upon a faded scarred strip of oilcloth tacked over the carpet, sat a washstand bearing a flowered bowl and pitcher and a row of towels; in the corner behind it sat a slop jar dressed also in fluted rose-colored paper.<sup>71</sup>

Faulkner captures the studied, albeit ersatz domesticity of this room, represented here by the mass produced lace curtains and lithographs. Despite these affectations, the space exudes an emptiness. Literary critic Cleanth Brooks writes regarding this passage: “The author relentlessly exposes the pretentious sleaziness of the room and the faked respectability that emanates from the machine-made curtains . . . .” The ephemeral ways in which prostitutes shaped their rooms are impossible to recover in trust deeds and probate records which listed only those items which belonged to the madam. A survey of bedroom contents reveals these spaces to be more utilitarian than exotic. Rather than stately pleasure domes, Memphis brothel bedrooms resembled boardinghouse interiors.<sup>72</sup>

Brothels not only resembled boardinghouses, they frequently served as cheap lodgings for men. Faulkner famously lampooned this in *Sanctuary* when two country rubes unwittingly boarded in Miss Reba's brothel because “them hotels is too high.” Men, however, frequently boarded in brothels for just this reason. Richard Tansey found that a dearth of reasonably priced lodgings in New Orleans led to working class men, particularly sailors and railroad workers, employing them as flophouses. Crammed into little more than three square miles, Memphis also

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<sup>71</sup> Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (Yale University Press, 1991), 120.

<sup>72</sup> Brooks, 120.

suffered from housing shortages, particularly when many of the structures in the city housed shops, saloons, or commission merchants. The use of brothels as cheap lodgings appears to have been more common in lower class houses. Mary Washington, a black madam who kept a working class brothel in the Grady's Hill suburb of South Memphis, boarded railroad workers on the side and ran a dray to make extra money. When W. Van Roberts told madam Annie Melrose "I just want a bed to sleep in," she treated it as a normal request and even waited on him personally when he became sick to his stomach.<sup>73</sup>

Brothel entrepreneurs took precautions against the spread of disease and filth among their boarders and this can be seen in the facilities provided in brothel bedrooms. Wash basins, spittoons, slop jars, and oil cloth all promoted cleanliness and the disposal of human waste. Given the history of Memphis as a city beset by numerous deadly epidemics, madams went to great pains to keep their bedroom spaces as clean as possible. "Safe sex" had a different meaning in nineteenth century Memphis. Parlor house beds presented madams and servants with a constant struggle against the forces of nature. Not so much in the realm of venereal disease, but in the prevention of pests and dirt. Oil cloth provided protection against mud and dirt tracked in by customers, as well as bodily fluids. Servants placed oil cloth on the floor and around the wash basin, but also at the foot of the bed, since many male guests would not remove their boots even while getting their money's worth. Madams kept yards of spare oil cloth in reserve for wet weather.<sup>74</sup>

During the warm months, when windows stood open to cool the stifling bedrooms, mosquitoes invaded from the nearby bayou *en masse*. Although the public did not grasp the

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<sup>73</sup> State v. Mary Washington, 1878, "Keeping a Bawdy House," Tennessee Supreme Court Cases, Tennessee State Library and Archives; Tansey, 47; *Appeal*, July 15, 1871.

<sup>74</sup> Alexy Simmons, *Red Light Ladies: Settlement Patterns and Material Culture on the Mining Frontier* (Department of Anthropology, Oregon State University, 1989), 66.



agency of mosquitoes in spreading the Yellow Fever until the 1880s, Memphians abominated the tiny pests. As sites where bodies lay exposed to a million proboscises, madams provided mosquito bars – gauze netting suspended on frames over beds – for the protection of their boarders and guests. Brothels transitioned easily into Yellow Fever hospitals because of their many beds, but also because of the widespread use of mosquito netting in nearly every bedroom.<sup>75</sup>

Beds, particularly those in boardinghouses, hotels, and brothels, had a reputation as breeding grounds for fleas and bed bugs. Reformers believed prostitutes bred social as well as physical pollution, and viewed the places of their work as unsanitary. Beds during this period promoted the proliferation of pests in part because manufacturers stuff them with organic materials such as hair, moss, corn shucks, cotton, and – the most luxurious – feathers. Bed bugs and fleas found these materials most welcoming. Madams purchased carbolic acid, a deadly toxic chemical, from druggists to apply to bed frames when insect infestation proved intractable. Applying these corrosive chemicals fell to servants. Manufacturers billed spring mattresses, developed in the middle of the nineteenth century, as a solution to the problem of pests, but even these early spring mattresses required a covering made of organic materials. Madams adopted spring mattresses quickly. By the late 1860s virtually every brothel in the city used spring mattresses instead of shuck or hair. These provided greater comfort and helped to prevent pests.<sup>76</sup>

Vigilance on the part of the madam and housekeeper provided another line of defense against insects and filth. According to Nell Kimball, the inspection of bedding occurred in high class houses daily, but in most houses once every one to two weeks. Madams and housekeepers

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<sup>75</sup> Keith, *Fever Season*, 9; Mosquito netting, or mosquito bars, are found in many brothels. See Louisa Fisher probate record, 1875-02355; Susan Powell probate 1876-02631, SCA.

<sup>76</sup> Good Housekeeping, Volume 7 (Clark W. Bryan & Co., 1888), 159; Nell Kimball, 4; Judith Flanders, *Inside the Victorian Home: A Portrait of Domestic Life in Victorian England*, (W.W. Norton, 2003), 46-48.

counted and marked linens prior to sending them to washerwomen. “Linens are a big item,” Nell Kimball remarked, “and a house can go busted if that isn't watched.” Madam Susan Powell's house used forty sheets, twenty spreads and comforters, and thirty-one pillow cases. Annie Cook's “Mansion House” regularly went through fifty-nine sheets, thirty-two blankets, and fifty-two pillow cases. In the low cribs and rented rooms, prostitutes rarely changed linens. These amounted to little more than “a gray sheet on a pallet” thrown away when men refused to lie down on it. The job of airing out all the linens used in parlor houses fell to servants, who performed a regular ritual of removing, shaking out, and changing bedding.<sup>77</sup>

“Safe sex” also meant protection from the bane of urban dwellers in the nineteenth century: fire. In an era of fire, coal-based heating, and flammable materials, an errant ember from a chimney alighting on a wood shingle roof or a misplaced oil lamp could lead to disaster. Brothels faced a higher risk of fire due to arson from angry mobs and customers, but also because of accidents wrought by drunken and disorderly behavior, poor construction, and proximity to areas with large amounts of fire accelerants. Many brothels stood near fire-prone localities such as lumber yards and cotton sheds. Between 1858 and 1900, at least eight brothels caught fire. In most instances fires resulted in total destruction. These conflagrations at times proved deadly for prostitutes. Nellie Linwood received “shockingly” bad burns on her face and neck in 1860. She lingered for four days from her injuries and died at the age of nineteen.<sup>78</sup>

Madams with sufficient funds worked to protect their places of business from conflagrations. The Iron Clad received its name after Mary Miller rebuilt the house in 1859 with an iron-clad roof and walls, fixtures intended to prevent fire. After this preventative measure, no fire again troubled the Iron Clad. Madams of the elite demimonde purchased fire insurance as a

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<sup>77</sup> Annie Cook probate record, 1878-0323; Susan Powell probate 1876-02631, SCA; Nell Kimball, 4.

<sup>78</sup> *Appeal*, March 20, 1860, December 12, 1858, October 16, 1867, July 30, 1885.

last line of defense. Margaret Hayden purchased a \$3,000 fire insurance policy from Aetna which covered only part of the \$7,000 in damage done by fire and water in an 1867 conflagration. Blanche McGee and Lou Sholes both took out fire insurance policies on their two-story brick houses, 80 and 82 Gayoso. This proved a good investment. On a hot summer night, a “big blaze” originating in a planing mill spread across two lumberyards, quickly enveloping 80 and 82 Gayoso. The women hastily exited the buildings “in toilettes even more décolleté than they are in the habit of appearing in,” some saving their personal possessions and trunks. One soiled dove remarked to onlookers that she “did not want her trunk touched – it was well insured, and let it burn.” The two houses, along with seven other dwellings along Gayoso, burned to cinders. The combined damage to McGee's and Sholes' property came to roughly \$13,000, of which insurance covered \$10,000.<sup>79</sup>

After purchasing furnishings and insuring investments, madams turned to staffing their houses. Operating a brothel resembled the workings of a small hotel. Linens had to be changed, at least daily if not after every guest, chamber pots had to be emptied, wine and drinks served, and the other quotidian duties of house maintenance attended to. To handle these tasks, many madams employed live-in servants. Domestic workers, largely female, represented the lowest stratum of laborers. As unskilled workers, domestic servants made much less than male unskilled laborers and other female workers, such as those employed in mills or factories. A Memphis chambermaid made between six and ten dollars per month, less than a third of what unskilled male laborers received. They worked long hours, and due to the late hours kept by brothels, probably had fewer “down” periods than average domestic servants.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, October 16, 1867, July 30, 1885.

<sup>80</sup> Susan Powell probate, SCA; Pauline Livingstone probate, SCA; Emily Sutton probate record, 1873-01690, SCA. There are precious few first-hand accounts of working as a servant in a brothel. See Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Harvard University Press, 1997) 113-

Brothel maids had to be ready in the early afternoon when sex workers called down for coffee, hard at work well past midnight when parlor houses encountered their highest volume, and went to bed around four or five in the morning. Domestic service, an especially difficult and disgusting job in respectable homes and businesses, presented servants with uniquely vile duties in houses of ill-fame. Chambermaids had to clean mud tracked in by customers, a multitude of human fluids, and face a malodorous environment. Servants also assisted prostitutes in self-medicating; servants bought the laudanum from the druggist around the corner and brought it to the waiting addict.<sup>81</sup>

Madams employed mainly free servants prior to the Civil War. Free women of color made up the bulk of these, such as Julia Jones a twenty-year old Tennessean employed in the Fifth Ward house of Eliza Goodrich. Others like Elizabeth Fielding, a thirty-six year old Englishwoman, came from Europe. Madams also employed multiracial domestic staffs: Mary Smith, a thirty-year old white woman from Kentucky worked as a maid alongside Susan Leslie and Mary Heart, both described as “Indian” in the 1860 census. Following the Civil War, the number of black women employed in brothels increased dramatically. This mirrored an overall increase in the number of black women in the Memphis workforce. By the late nineteenth century black women made up seventy-five percent of the female work force in Memphis.<sup>82</sup>

Prior to the Civil War, slaves made up a tiny minority of brothel servants. Only two providers of sexual services are known to have owned slaves in the 1860 census: Bridget Fitzsimmons, who owned two, and Elizabeth Whitters with four. Fitzsimmons kept an outwardly

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114. See also Susan Tucker, *Telling Memories Among Southern Women: Domestic Workers and Their Employers in the Segregated South* (Random House, 1988).

<sup>81</sup> Nell Kimball vividly describes the duties of servants, who worked in an environment that reeked of “body powder, Lysol, dead cigars . . . sweat, scent, piss, armpits, medical douche, and spilled liquor.” Kimball, 9.

<sup>82</sup> 1860 United States Federal Census, Ward 5, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee, 66, 92; 1860 Census, Ward 6, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee, 156; Bond, *Memphis in Black and White*, 71.

reputable working class boardinghouse, but rented rooms to sex workers to make money on the side. An enslaved woman and an eleven-year old child worked in Fitzsimmons's house, probably doing cooking and domestic work. Elizabeth Whitters employed three of her slaves, two men and one woman in their mid to late twenties, along with two “mulatto” free women of color, as servants in her brothel at the corner of Union and Front. Only the name of the enslaved man “Harrison” is known, the identities of the others remain obscure. The enslaved may have found servitude in Whitters's house particularly galling – the building had once been used as a slave mart by Isaac Bolton. This brothel, one of the largest, and undoubtedly one of the busiest in the city prior to the Civil War, boarded ten women. Enslaved men worked as carriage drivers and butlers while enslaved women and free women of color did duty as chambermaids and cooks. A small enslaved child of four years also lived in Whitters household.<sup>83</sup>

Little is known of madams' interactions with slaves and free people of color. What evidence exists suggests complex relationships between sex workers and the enslaved. On the one hand, madams relied on people of color for their living and even made common cause with them. Their shared position of marginality may have tended to bring the two groups together. In the 1830s mobs attacked sex workers for crossing the color line and harboring a runaway slave. Evidence from the later antebellum period would appear to bolster the notion that sex workers challenged racial boundaries in the city. In November of 1860 Madam Puss Pettus (or Petty) came before the city recorder on a charge of forging a pass for a slave, an offense punishable by time in the penitentiary. Although found not guilty, the charge offers a tantalizing suggestion of

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<sup>83</sup> 1860 U.S. Federal Census Slave Schedules, Ward 4, Memphis, Shelby, Tennessee, 10; 1860 U.S. Federal Census Slave Schedules, Ward 5, Memphis, Shelby, Tennessee, 5; Memphis Recorder Docket, February 4, 1862, SCA. The question of whether Whitters prostituted her slaves is impossible to answer with certainty. See Joyce Broussard, “Malvina Matthews: The Murderess Madam of Civil-War-Era Natchez,” *Journal of Mississippi History* 73 (2011): 23-58.

cooperation between enslaved people and sex workers. Other evidence, however, suggests madams were neither kind masters nor employers. On two occasions, madam Rosalie Pavid received a five dollar fine for severely beating her white chambermaid. And given the sometimes troubled relationships between madams and sex workers, it is likely madams had similarly strained relationships with slaves and people of color as well. Ruby Owens, who worked as a servant in a post-war Atlanta brothel, complained the proprietor used her name to buy illegal alcohol without her consent. In addition, the madam refused to share any of the profits from the alcohol bought under her name. Although no such evidence exists for Memphis, madams may have taken similar attitudes toward “the help.”<sup>84</sup>

The women who worked as servants in brothels had to possess little or no qualms about working in a house that stamped them with shame. Some domestics previously worked as prostitutes, but now had married or gotten too old to profit from sex work. Elizabeth Fielding, who worked in the brothel of Rosalie Pavid, fits the profile of a former sex worker. Although only thirty-six, Fielding was almost a decade older than the madam who employed her. Fielding also received as many stints in the workhouse for drunkenness and disorderly conduct as a working-class prostitute. The larger group of domestics, however, came from desperate pecuniary situations and cared little for middle class notions of respectability. Ruby Owens, who worked in an Atlanta brothel, commented that she had simply been doing what she needed to get by: “I wasn't working for nothing but for a living.”<sup>85</sup>

For female servants, black and white, only a very thin boundary separated domestic work and sex work. Rather than operating in the background, servants worked as mediators between

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<sup>84</sup> Memphis Recorder Docket, November 14, 1860, SCA; *Appeal*, May 13, 1862; Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 113-114.

<sup>85</sup> 1860 U.S. Federal Census, Ward 6, Memphis, Shelby, Tennessee, 156; Memphis Police Blotter, 1858-1860, May 21, May 30, 1860, SCA; Hunter, 114.

guests and sex workers. Maids summoned sex workers into the parlor when guests arrived, chiming “company, girls!” This placed servants in a position where guests might select them for sexual encounters. As young, single women in an atmosphere of sexual license, madams undoubtedly pressed servants into the ranks of sex workers from time to time. Nell Kimball recalled the maids in a St. Louis brothel drafted into prostitution if a guest insisted. Rape remained a persistent threat, but it is unlikely any madam would allow the “help” to be exploited sexually without payment. When authorities caught Mary Miller's black servant “hugging” a white man in the kitchen of her establishment, the situation may have been prearranged. Very little went on unnoticed in a house of ill-fame.<sup>86</sup>

The comforts madams purchased – whether furniture, pianos, or servants – also served to attract boarders. Madams recruited sex workers who came in off the street, through informal networks that connected madams with other women of their class, and through recruitment trips to scout out new “talent.” Madams who could afford to be selective took care to choose young women possessed of physical charms and stable enough to work in a parlor house environment. To ensure applicants met their expectations, brothel entrepreneurs conducted interviews with prospects to determine their suitability for sex work. Women frequently engaged in dissimulation: age, origin, and sexual experience could be changed to suit the situation. Madams, accordingly, needed to be good judges of character. Shrewd madams expected lies from boarders, and even encouraged it to an extent. Women who maintained a certain frame excelled at presenting customers with a welcoming, seductive face.

Nell Kimball remarked that all sex workers were “liars,” an observation she claimed came from experience. Kimball recalled her first interview with a German couple who kept a

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<sup>86</sup> W.C. Williams, *Survey of Commercialized Prostitution in Memphis* (Tennessee Health Department, 1938), Report H-1, SCA; Kimball, 56; *Appeal*, March 17, 1861.

brothel in St. Louis. *Where are you from? How old are you? Are you a virgin?* “They were all business,” Kimball remarked, “all practical flesh merchants. That crafty look of cathouse owners could have been what was foremost on their fat Dutchie faces.” Kimball lied about her age and told her interviewers her husband abandoned her (she was unmarried). Kimball's deception worked, however, inaugurating her career as a sex worker at the age of fifteen. Madeleine Blair, who began her career in Kansas City, recalled the intimidating experience of seeking work in the best parlor houses in Chicago. “I felt a qualm of soul-sick terror,” she wrote, “but I girded myself for the interview.” Madam Lizzie Allen, the proprietor of the best house in Chicago, fixed Blair with a chilly stare and pried into her personal life. Not at all satisfied with Blair's honest responses, Allen insisted on inventing a new persona for Madeleine. She now hailed from St. Louis, went by “Miss Blair,” and must never tell anyone that she had boarded in the “wild and wooly west.” Madam Allen also invented her own persona: she once worked as a chambermaid in the Planter's Hotel in St. Louis, a past she sought to keep hidden from her respectable clients. Everyone hid from something, whether the shame of past deeds or the pain of once having been a “common” laboring woman. Just as madams presented a carefully constructed domestic image to customers, madams shaped the personae of their boarders. In the elite parlors, everyone acted out a role. Those most successful in wearing a mask ascended the sex trade ladder.<sup>87</sup>

The initial interview between a madam and a prospective boarder also laid out the rules of the house. Madams informed prospective boarders up front about the cost of board and their share of the profits. No figures for Memphis have been found, but a typical madam in the South charged five to ten dollars a week for board and took half of what a sex worker made. How much a sex worker charged depended upon the house. First class houses charged twenty dollars for a

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<sup>87</sup> Nell Kimball, 54; *Madeleine*, 101, 121-122.



lay, while middle class houses ranged from five to ten dollars. Low brothels and crib prostitutes charged a dollar or less. A woman in a middle class house with two or three customers a night could expect to take in around seventy dollars a week after subtracting board and the madam's cut. Some madams permitted their boarders to keep any extra given by customers as gifts or tips. In some houses madams required boarders to hand over half of what they received as gifts, prompting sex workers to descend into what Madeleine Blair referred to as “a labyrinth of lies.” Many of the conflicts that arose between madams and prostitutes had their origin in disputes over money. Sex workers preferred to spend tips received from customers on liquor rather than hand over half to their madam. Stricter houses provided fines for women who did not abide by these rules. Repeated violation resulted in eviction.<sup>88</sup>

Successful madams maintained order in their brothels by establishing rules of conduct both within and outside of their houses. While rules varied from house to house, many madams required their women to dress well, to be in the parlor by a certain time daily, and to refrain from appearing intoxicated. Rules depended upon the madam, but also the class, size, and clientele of the establishment. Some madams forbade their inmates to visit disreputable drinking establishments frequented by violent toughs on the grounds that drunkenness and rough customers could harm business. One disreputable locality, the aptly named Hooker's Park, stood two miles outside of town on the Prospect Park dummy rail line. Here stood a beer garden park where “women of the town” congregated with fast young men to sip beer. It also became the scene of large brawls. Madams of the better houses absolutely forbade their girls to set foot there. “None of the girls here go to Hooker's Park,” one madam remarked, “and if they did, I'd ask them for their room when they returned. It's too tough for that.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 64-65; Kimball, 193.

<sup>89</sup> *Appeal*, July 4, 1888.

Not all women came in from off the street seeking admittance to houses of ill-fame. Madams also procured young women by traveling to neighboring cities where their contacts knew of likely prospects. Madams who recruited in this fashion relied on contacts in distant cities. Madams called on associates in the sex trade as well as other prostitutes and “low characters of the male persuasion,” who had knowledge of “fast” young women not yet formally entered upon a life of prostitution. Madams or their agents offered these girls inducements such as promises of living in comfort free from parental control or the drudgery of mill work. Madams promised a life of relative ease, nice clothes, good food, the attention of male admirers, and regular visits to the theater. Brothel entrepreneurs held out the possibility of participating in the youth culture young people aspired to be a part of. Others employed outright deception, promising work as chambermaids or domestic servants in boardinghouses.<sup>90</sup>

Pauline Livingstone stands out as a particularly prolific procurer. “No more brazen and dangerous woman than Pauline Livingstone,” a Louisville reporter wrote, “ever lived.” Livingstone recruited dozens of young women below the age of eighteen to work in her brothel, the Iron Clad, particularly from Louisville and Evansville, Indiana between the early 1870s and the mid-1880s. In 1884, authorities removed a fourteen year old Indiana girl from the brothel of Livingstone at 13 Winchester Street. The unnamed girl – her last name is given as Miller - claimed to have been misled by one of the inmates, named “Aunt Mag,” who promised employment as a servant in a home in Arkansas. Customers in the Iron Clad heard her sobbing in the next room and alerted the police. When questioned, Livingstone and her boarders countered the girl had come of her own free will and with the permission of her mother. Livingstone claimed stories of seduction and abduction “were often told by women of her class purely for the

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., July 26, 1882.

pleasure of lying and from the desire to make a sensation,” adding that it would be “dangerous” to induce a “pure” girl into the “life in all its horrible reality” unprepared to “endure it without complaint.” The papers painted a different story. The Louisville *Sunday Argus* reported on Livingstone's annual trips to that city for the purpose of recruiting young women for her “dive” in Memphis. In an 1882 trip Livingstone succeeded in recruiting at least five young women, including one Lulu Leonard, “a mere child,” and another fifteen-year-old. The *Sunday Argus* reported Livingstone's visit to a local mill to recruit unsupervised, underage girls. When the girls determined her purpose, they fled.<sup>91</sup>

Evidence suggests the police and city authorities colluded with Livingstone in this practice. The police supported her side of the story, asserting that at least two girls who claimed to be deluded by Livingstone had in fact fabricated their stories. Livingstone also claimed she registered every woman who entered her establishment with the police so as to prevent any run-ins with law enforcement. A former inmate of Livingstone's brothel claimed that “Mme. Livingstone stands in with the chief of police and judge of the city court, and that nothing can be done with her as long as that ring exists.”<sup>92</sup>

### **Madams and the Police**

Very little of what went on in brothels escaped the attention of the Memphis Metropolitan Police. The policy of the Memphis police commissioners with regard to vice consisted of “regulating and controlling” rather than suppressing – the police finding the former much more profitable. In most major cities prostitution and municipal graft went hand-in-hand. Tammany

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., June 1, 1884, July 26, 1882.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

Hall accumulated much of its political and material capital through running prostitution directly or taking kickbacks from madams. In Memphis, district attorneys, aldermen, and police all took a cut of the sex trade honeypot, whether in sexual favors, cash, or both. And dominant cultural attitudes regarding prostitution and male recreation ensured prostitution would be tolerated. Since the Civil War, leading men in the city deemed prostitution a “necessary evil.” They may have disagreed on its scope and its location, but most men accepted it as a necessity. As Nell Kimball put it, “The city needed whores, whores needed houses, houses kept nice young men and brutes from raping their daughters, sisters, wives.” For decades Memphis operated under a system of unofficial licensure and taxation for houses of ill-fame, although it is better understood as a system of extortion. The police, and to a lesser extent the Shelby County sheriff, extracted protection money from houses, sometimes monthly, at other times every two or three months. The police required twenty-five dollars from each house and ten dollars from every inmate. In 1867, with nineteen houses of ill-fame and roughly 150 inmates paying protection, the police department regularly received nearly two thousand dollars in protection money. This does not include the money extorted by officers on the side or paid as bribes to remain silent about potential offenses.<sup>93</sup>

Paying protection money to the police had material benefits for madams. The growth of police involvement in prostitution led to a marked reduction in disturbances at brothels throughout the 1870s and 1880s. Gone were the days of brothel riots and brothel bullies. Class and racial factors, however, shaped protection. Police provided uneven protection for black or mixed-race houses. Complaints regarding police protection for “negro houses of ill-fame” suggest the police did cooperate with black madams, but public outcry against black vice

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<sup>93</sup> *Ledger*, April 12, 1876; Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 256; Kimball, 190; The number of houses in 1867 was derived from arrest records in the Memphis Recorder Docket and Police Court records, 1867, SCA.

districts received more prompt attention from authorities. Areas such as “Rotten Row,” “Happy Hollow,” and “Hell's Half Acre,” black and working class Irish entertainment and vice districts, received prompt suppression by authorities. For the best houses, protection meant compromising situations could be quietly disposed of with police help. When social functions took place at high class houses, police officers stationed outside prevented riff-raff from gaining entry and ensured elite men received protection from exposure.<sup>94</sup>

The police subjected madams who failed to pay protection money to surprise raids. Even madams who paid protection – or who believed they had paid protection – could be raided by officers who wanted their own slice of graft or had been piqued by a madam's refusal to pay an additional bribe. Raids often occurred at the insistence of the police board and at others on the orders of individual officers. Known also as “descents,” police raids humiliated sex workers and harmed business. Officers pushed their way into houses and arrested everyone inside, giving the inmates little time to dress themselves. Officers then marched the women through the streets half dressed, attracting onlookers along the way. Ushered into the stationhouse, women huddled around a coal stove while an officer collected “forfeits” (fines). Jail time did not usually result from raids. Rather, once the bawdy “tax” had been paid, the women returned to their lodgings. Raids served a dual purpose; they brought revenue to the department while serving as a kind of public relations theater. “Descents” on houses of ill-fame played well in the papers and convinced the general public the department acted tough on vice.<sup>95</sup>

Other city officials, including the mayor and the sheriff, offered protection to houses of ill-fame. Margaret Hayden paid \$150.00 per year to the mayor for protection from police raids which her lawyer considered “lawless extortion.” After Hayden's death in 1870, the

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<sup>94</sup> *Ledger*, February 21, 1867, December 28, 1880.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, February 24, 1874.

administrator of her estate brought suit and recovered \$150.00 for her orphaned daughter Mary. The sheriff also extracted payments for protection from houses of ill-fame, a matter which fostered conflict between law enforcement agencies. Sheriff's deputies and the police fought for control of brothel turf. In 1887 a group of brothel bullies, probably acting on the orders of the sheriff, tore up the furniture and wallpaper in a house kept by Biddy O'Brien. When the police arrived to quell the disturbance, Sheriff's Deputy Phil Doherty stopped the officers, demanding "that the prisoners should not be taken to the station." A scuffle ensued, enabling the miscreants to escape, and Doherty found himself led to the stationhouse in their stead.<sup>96</sup>

But not everyone in city and county government approved of the informal system of extracting a "tax" from houses of ill-fame. Reformers – and also those angry over not receiving their slice of the action – brought public attention to the practice through the press in 1867. In April of that year the grand jury investigated the system of bawdy blackmail, but failed to find a true bill against any municipal authorities. The following year, Judge G. Waldran of the municipal court again instructed the grand jury to investigate graft in the city. Once again the grand jury found no evidence of wrongdoing, noting instead the cooperation of the police and the "well kept" official records at the stationhouse. Unsatisfied with these findings, Waldran again instructed the grand jury to look carefully into the records of the police. Waldran's chief concern sprang from the fact that neither rank and file policemen nor the police commissioners took a monthly oath required by city ordinance swearing they had not appropriated monies or seized property for private use. Waldran affixed the blame for this squarely on the police commissioners. "I verily believe," Waldran commented in his instructions to the jury, "there is not a candid man within the jurisdiction of this Court but believes that the Chief and the

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<sup>96</sup> Margaret Hayden probate record, 1870-01117, SCA; *Appeal*, September 30, 1887.

Financial Commissioner have been guilty of misappropriating public funds.”<sup>97</sup>

The response of the police commissioners to this third grand jury investigation reveals a great deal about the culture of the Memphis police department in the 1860s. In a letter to the editors of the city papers, police commissioners S.B. Beaumont and A.P. Burditt protested the renewed investigation, promising that “when the proper time arrives, we will lay before *them* and the Grand Jury of the Criminal Court, *facts* in regard to the *official* and *private* conduct of one who disgraces the judicial ermine in this city, that will sicken the community, and if justice is not dead, will hurl him from power.” A month later the superintendent of the metropolitan police filed an injunction through the chancery court to have Judge Waldran removed from his position on a technicality. He alleged Waldran had not lived in the state the three years required to hold office. Waldran fired back by removing a juror from the grand jury due to allegations of police tampering. In another communication to the city papers, Beaumont and Burditt denied they tampered with a juror, describing Waldran as a “perjured scoundrel and liar.” Despite threats brought by the department, the third grand jury report issued in July charged the department with a “system of *imaginary arrest* but *real license*” with regard to gambling halls and brothels. In August of 1868, a jury found A.P. Burditt, the Financial Commissioner of police, guilty of misappropriating funds and removed him from office.<sup>98</sup>

The removal of Burditt, however, did not end police graft. Removing one man had symbolic value, but it did not change the culture of blackmail and corruption. In 1870, Judges Hudson and Flippin instructed two separate grand juries to ferret out official corruption. In August of that year, the grand jury reported on the persistence of the practice within the department, but would-be reformers stood powerless to end it. By 1876, Police Chief Athy, who

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<sup>97</sup> *Ledger*, June 4, 1868.

<sup>98</sup> *Ledger*, June 8, 1868, July 8, July 10, August 25, 1868.

positioned himself as tough on vice, privately tolerated the existence of brothels and gambling dens as long as they did not disturb the peace. In a meeting of the city council, Alderman Cochran criticized Athy by asserting that brothels operated openly on Washington Street and Center Alley. Cochran offered to take Athy and the Council there personally and show them: “If these things are not true,” added Cochran, “I am willing to leave town.” Athy, who sat in attendance at the meeting, rose and replied: “Mr. Cochran, you will then have to leave town.”<sup>99</sup>

The *Appeal* ridiculed the notion that a “ring” made up of the metropolitan police, judges, and houses of prostitution existed. Such a ring, however, did exist. Close to twenty percent of brothel landlords served as city or county officials.<sup>100</sup>

It should come as no surprise that other city officials frequently gave protection to houses of prostitution. In 1875 and 1876, residents of the intersection of Washington and Second Streets struggled to convince the police to remove brothels from their neighborhood. This area, referred to as the “Five Points” of Memphis, centered on a saloon and collection and low brothels known as the “Temple of Virtue.” G.W. Truehart, a resident of Washington Street who became fed up with nightly rows and the declining value of his home led the effort to remove this nuisance and other nearby houses of prostitution. Truehart brought repeated complaints against five madams on the grounds that their establishments constituted a public nuisance. His counsel asked that each madam put up bond for good behavior; if they failed to behave themselves, their establishments should be closed down by the police. In response, the police and city authorities delayed and dragged their feet. City magistrates repeatedly denied they had the power to require bond from madams for good behavior.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> *Appeal*, August 17, 1870; *Ledger*, April 12, 1876.

<sup>100</sup> *Appeal*, July 27, 1882.

<sup>101</sup> *Ledger*, August 25, September 18, October 25, 1875, May 19, November 4, 1876.



The police maintained that since so few respectable people lived in the area it made for the best locality for houses of ill-fame to operate. While all of this legal and bureaucratic wrangling went on, the police decisively abated a bagnio kept by Ida Powell on Jefferson near Third. The reasoning: a school for girls opened nearby. The police aggressively removed brothels in some instances, particularly when it involved shielding children from exposure to prostitutes, but protected them in the Washington Street district. Judge Patrick Winters, who ruled on the legal authority of city magistrates to impose bonds on madams, rented one of his properties to sex workers. Winters, unsurprisingly, ruled that city magistrates did not have the power impose bond on madams. The ruling stopped G.W. Truehart's crusade in its tracks.<sup>102</sup>

But negative media attention and legal harassment convinced some madams to leave the Washington Street vice district. The most notable, Pauline Livingstone, agreed to vacate her brothel and relocate to Winchester Street. Quiet pressure may have also been exerted by the police and city officials. Running legal interference for madams had become a political liability. Livingstone, in a letter to the *Appeal*, complained of the rootless condition of her class:

Because we have fallen, shall we be driven from house to house, like the wild, savage Indians of the prairie border - no home, no shelter, nowhere even to lay our poor heads, denied even the prayers of the righteous? Shall we live in the sea like fish, or shall we live in the air like untamed birds?<sup>103</sup>

By the 1880s, the Washington Street bawdy district largely disappeared and the infamous “Temple of Virtue” reopened as the respectable St. Nicholas Hotel.<sup>104</sup>

Madams, police, and city officials worked together to keep brothels open, so long as they

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., August 18, September 18, 1875.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., May 28, 1880.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., September 18, 1880.

stood in areas away from respectable eyes. This cooperation increased during the Taxing District period following the Yellow Fever epidemics of 1878 and 1879. With a new charter that empowered the government of Memphis to regulate prostitution, President David Park “Pappy” Hadden had more power to ensure brothels remained orderly and unmolested. Hadden did not seek to cast the underworld of Memphis into the outer darkness, but to control it. An indication of Hadden's attitude toward the more disreputable elements can be seen in a device of his own invention – called “Hadden's Horn” – to prevent cheating at dice. Hadden took a similar view of madams and their inmates, whom he wanted “cribbed, cabined, and confined,” but not driven out of business. In 1882, six madams petitioned the Taxing District to establish a bawdy district in Pinch. The petition, signed by Pauline Livingstone, Kate Cessna, Blanche Curry, Sarah O'Bryan, Kate Mortimer, and Jennie Hilton, stated that brothels located on “much-frequented” thoroughfares were “corrupting of public morals.” It would be better, the madams believed, to locate them in some out of the way area where they would not corrupt youth. In addition, the madams craved security from drunken customers and other criminal elements. Six property owners in Pinch who owned lots along Winchester Street also signed their names to the petition, giving their support to the establishment of such a district. Authorities tabled the petition for the time being. Four years later President Hadden began working to establish a red light district.<sup>105</sup>

In 1886, President Hadden announced he would limit all houses of ill-fame to one part of the city. Hadden selected the area along Gayoso, between Second and DeSoto Streets. He planned to close down all Brothels on DeSoto as far north as Union, as well as on St. Martin and

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<sup>105</sup> *Appeal*, May 23, 1882; *Crisis and Commission*, 48. The Taxing District of Memphis, which existed under a commission government, was the result of the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1878 and 1879. This disaster so greatly depleted the population of the city that the state revoked its charter and it became a taxing district of Nashville. Under this new government, the President of the Taxing District was granted expansive powers in “regulating” prostitution and vice. For more on this system of government, see Lynette Boney Wrenn, *Crisis and Commission Government in Memphis: Elite Rule in a Gilded Age City* and Lauterbach, *Beale Street Dynasty*.

Linden Streets. Hadden's effort along these lines, however, proved only partially successful. By 1890, brothels clustered in three areas of the city. While they had once dotted the landscape of Memphis, they now stood primarily in Pinch, particularly along North Front Street and Winchester, along Gayoso and Short Third Streets, and on South Main, near the intersection of Huling. That year the police began keeping an official list of all brothels in the city which the department published in its annual report. After the establishment of the Taxing District, the involvement of city officials in the regulation of prostitution increased greatly and would continue to increase in the coming decades.<sup>106</sup>

### **Black Madams**

For black madams, the cooperation of city officials and the protection of elite men proved less forthcoming for much of the nineteenth century. City authorities monitored black brothel entrepreneurs more closely and reacted with less tolerance to their excesses and disorderly behavior. During Reconstruction black madams came under attack from city authorities, in part because they associated black resorts of pleasure with Republican political organization. Believing black vice districts bred political disorder, crime, and disease, authorities summarily demolished them.

Black madams, however, did have white supporters and economic allies. This

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., June 3, 1886; *Biennial Report of the Fire and Police Commissioners of the Taxing District of Shelby County, Tennessee, For the Years 1889 and 1890* (S.C. Toof, 1891), 239. Municipal involvement in the regulation of prostitution appears to have reached a high point in the 1930s. During that period, prostitutes were given certificates from the Department of Health and madams were instructed by police to cease retailing liquor and playing loud music during election season. One prostitute remarked to an official from the Tennessee health department that the police “never bother us except around election to see that we get out and vote.” Madams told their girls who to vote for in local elections. See W.C. Williams, *Survey of Commercialized Prostitution in Memphis* (Tennessee Health Department, 1938), Report H-1, SCA.

increasingly became the case as the century came to a close. Paradoxically, the hardening of racial boundaries under Jim Crow led to an increase in the number of black parlor houses that catered to white men. The establishment of public boundaries between whites and blacks necessitated the development of “segregated districts” where white men could continue to exercise their sexual prerogative. Segregation protected whites from association with those who might threaten their claims to whiteness. This logic bore a striking similarity to that found in earlier laws applied to sex workers which sheltered white women from disreputable associations. Both instances, the segregation of sex workers and African Americans, served to maintain the sexual dominance of white men. A small class of black madams profited from this new segregated racial and sexual order.<sup>107</sup>

Black leaders challenged this order by attempting to stamp out the black-operated resorts of vice in their neighborhoods, but failed due to the power of white patriarchal control and the deeply entwined personal and business connections of elite white men and black sex workers. Nevertheless, black madams occupied a much more precarious position than most white madams, and a code of silence governed the operation of their establishments.

In June of 1889, the suspicious wife of an unnamed “prominent citizen” followed her husband around town in a carriage. When the unfaithful husband dismounted at Short Third Street, two black prostitutes emerged from a house and greeted him by his first name. His irate spouse decided she had seen enough and angrily demanded that he come home with her at once. Chagrined, the erring husband returned home in his wife's hack. In instances where interracial

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<sup>107</sup> Ariela J. Gross, *What Blood Won't Tell: A History of Race on Trial in America* (Harvard University Press, 2008); Glenda E. Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (University of North Carolina Press, 1996). Gilmore argues that all prostitutes were “metaphorically black.” This hid them from respectable white women and enabled white men to visit them “without guilt and white women need not care about their reformation.”

dalliances between elites and black prostitutes became public, the press usually withheld names.<sup>108</sup>

This underscores an important aspect of black and interracial prostitution in Memphis: a code of silence governed those who operated within. The larger sex trade also had such an unspoken code, but it appears to have been particularly strong within the black segment of the city. Silence on the part of black sex workers and their neighbors arose out of the violence of slavery, reconstruction, and Jim Crow. Black prostitutes knew of their precarious situation and acted accordingly. Silence protected the community from violence, but also upheld the respectability of black and white leaders who profited from and protected sex workers.<sup>109</sup>

Despite their well-known reputations, black Memphians either kept silent or pretended not to know their neighbors operated brothels. An illustrative case is that of Mary Washington. In 1877, the city charged Washington with keeping a bawdy house. Washington solicited customers in the street, remarking to one man, “I keep girls, as usual.” On the witness stand, her neighbors Aaron Brookes, Mary Willeford, and Silas Jones all represented her as an “industrious” woman who boarded railroad workers, sold milk, took in sewing, and peddled wood about town. Not one of them admitted to knowing she ran a brothel. Black madams and sex workers also kept silent about each other when approached by the press. When a reporter attempted to interview black prostitutes on Short Third Street about an attempted suicide in their midst, he encountered closed doors and a wall of silence from every woman he approached. “The inhabitants of Short Third Street are not naturally of a communicative temperament,” he wrote, “and at sight of a reporter

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<sup>108</sup> *Appeal*, June 25, 1889

<sup>109</sup> See Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*, 58, 69-70; Rosen casts doubt on whether Thompson ran a house of assignation. Stephen Ash, *A Massacre in Memphis*, 236 n. 57 questions whether Thompson was ever sexually assaulted. From the evidence, it is clear that Thompson operated a house of assignation. Whether police raped Thompson in 1866 is less clear, but there is ample evidence to suggest Lucy Smith, Thompson's companion, lied about events during the riot.

they shut up like an oyster.” This would have been unusual behavior for white sex workers, who frequently spoke with reporters.<sup>110</sup>

Keeping quiet protected respectable black men like Robert Church, the South's “first black millionaire,” who made a substantial portion of his fortune through the sex trade. By the late 1880s Church owned many of the houses of prostitution on Short Third and Gayoso. Church built five houses on Short Third at a cost of \$12,000 and then subdivided some of these houses into multiple brothels. By the late 1880s, Church transformed Short Third and much of Gayoso into his personal fiefdom. If any of Church's tenants brought negative attention to his properties through disorderly conduct, they could be evicted. His prominent place in the black community, philanthropy, connection to religious leaders, and political activities relied upon the maintenance of a semblance of respectability. For Church's tenants, this meant keeping quiet about goings-on in his domain<sup>111</sup>.

Fewer black madams owned brothels than their white counterparts. Lines of credit and financing proved harder to come by for people of color. This, compounded by segregation, meant fewer options for aspiring black madams. In 1889, none of the thirteen women of color who operated houses of ill fame owned their establishments. Black women increasingly became the owners of brothels beginning in the 1890s.<sup>112</sup>

Kate Puris, who went by the working name of Grace Stanley rose to the top of the sex trade in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her establishment, known as “The Stanley Club” or “Stanley Hall” stood on the south side of Gayoso Street, and developed into

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<sup>110</sup> State v. Mary Washington, 1878, “Keeping a Bawdy House,” Tennessee Supreme Court Cases, Tennessee State Library and Archives; *Appeal*, October 31, 1888.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, September 1, 1886; See Lauterbach, *Beale Street Dynasty* for an in-depth account of the activities of Church.

<sup>112</sup> *Biennial Report of the Fire and Police Commissioners of the Taxing District of Shelby County, Tennessee, For the Years 1889 and 1890* (S.C. Toof, 1891), 239.

something of an institution in the first decades of the twentieth century. Born into slavery in Arkansas on the eve of the Civil War, Stanley grew up as a sharecropper on the farm of her former masters. Her widowed mother, Eliza, raised five children on her own. In the late nineteenth century, Stanley relocated with her family to Memphis and probably worked as a prostitute. By 1898 she amassed enough capital and know-how to transition into brothel management.<sup>113</sup>

Stanley's success came in part from her ability to tap into the support and patronage of elite white men. In 1898, she bought a lot on the south side of Gayoso Street from Emma and P.F. Kehse for \$1,600. While this would have been impossible for most black women, Stanley called on well-to-do DeSoto County planter and newspapers editor R.M. Banks as her security. The nature of the connection between the two is uncertain, but a romantic link likely existed. Banks became an investor in the success of Stanley's mansion of vice, requiring among other things that she purchase insurance on the property. Stanley moved her family, including nephews and nieces, into separate apartments in her bordello at 121 Gayoso. Stanley was the only madam in Memphis who lived with her mother. Some of these family members may have been employed as staff in the bordello. Stanley later moved to a more commodious establishment at 234 Gayoso, a house large enough for its own dance floor. An observer described the parlor and rooms as so lavishly decorated that “not even the castle of a baron could compare.” Stanley called this house “Stanley Hall,” and it developed a national reputation for its women, “black and smooth like velvet with a soul.”<sup>114</sup>

Planters from Mississippi, elite Memphis merchants, and “big names that were on the

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<sup>113</sup> 1870 United States Federal Census, Pope County Arkansas, 11.

<sup>114</sup> P.F. Kehse to Katie L. Puris, Book 266, pg. 59, SCA.; Lee, *Beale Street, 104-105*; Kate L. Puris to R.M. Banks, Book 269, pg. 25, SCA. Banks' paper was called *The Promoter. American Newspaper Directory* (George P. Rowell & Co., 1897), 483.

social register from New York to 'Frisco,” came through the front door every night to socialize, drink, and engage in what southern society publicly deemed taboo, and even illegal. Grace Stanley sold interracial sex to elite white men and maintained segregated accommodations. Black men could not enter her house – or any house on Gayoso for that matter – until after three in the morning, and then only through a side entrance. Black admirers of Grace's girls often had to meet them at houses of assignation rather than call on them at her “Club.”<sup>115</sup>

But Stanley represents the elite of her class. For the majority of the nineteenth century, black women ran smaller, more crowded brothels of poorer quality. Although not the preserve of black houses, madams of color turned more to swindles or theft from customers to make ends meet. Evidence also suggests black bawdy houses served as community meeting places. In at least one instance, a colored house of ill-fame served a gathering place for neighborhood women to do sewing.

For much of the nineteenth century, colored houses offered little in the way of luxury. Lottie Groves boarded four women above a store front on North Front Street that stood less than 100 feet from a black school. A block away stood another small colored brothel kept by Blanch Alexander that boarded five women. Memphians called this block of North Front “Hobo Hollow” for its impoverished denizens, ramshackle dwellings, and violent crime. A block of rat infested, run-down tenements known as “Rotten Row,” which stood at the intersection of Gayoso and Front Streets, served as a black vice district in the years following the Civil War. Physically and materially removed from the glitz of the high class houses on Gayoso that later dominated the nightlife of the early twentieth century, these establishments are representative of the derelict tenements black madams generally inhabited.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Lee, *Beale Street*, 105.

<sup>116</sup> *Biennial Report of the Fire and Police Commissioners of the Taxing District of Shelby County, Tennessee, For the*



Black madams, like many of their lower-class white counterparts, turned frequently to swindling and robbing customers. An illustrative case is that of Jane Young, a middle-aged, mixed-race freedwoman who boarded at least three prostitutes in her “shanty” in an alley that ran east off Fourth Street between Court and Jefferson. Sex cost less than a dollar in Young's house and poverty, desperation, and violence reigned. In December of 1872, one of Young's boarders, “a white woman of depraved instincts and habits” named Frances Maple died from the effects of drug addiction and starvation. Young employed a “stalwart negro man” known as a “buffer” who beat customers and stole their money. The shame associated with entering such an establishment meant many white countrymen never went to the police. In 1871, the criminal court sent Young and one of her boarders to jail for robbing a white man of thirty dollars. After their release they continued to engage in the same practice.<sup>117</sup>

Women of color operated houses that in some instances doubled as community gathering places, a reflection of the poorer material circumstances of both the madams and their neighbors. A house of assignation kept by Mag Williams also doubled as a site where washerwomen gathered to wash laundry. Mary Washington's house bustled with prostitutes and working men who boarded there, as well as women from the neighborhood who came to do sewing on her sewing machine. Working-class black women did not accept middle-class notions regarding houses of prostitution.<sup>118</sup>

The Memphis press and the white public did not have a positive view of black madams and their boarders. During the turbulent years following the Civil War, black vice districts quickly developed in the city. The growth of a class of black brothel proprietors followed soon

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*Years 1889 and 1890* (S.C. Toof, 1891), 239; *Appeal*, October 29, 1871; *Commercial Appeal*, October 8, 1894.  
<sup>117</sup> *Ledger*, November 15, 1872; *Appeal*, December 8, 1872, August 18, 1871, August 13, 1873.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, September 18, 1884; *State v. Mary Washington*, 1878, “Keeping a Bawdy House,” Tennessee Supreme Court Cases, TSLA.

thereafter, much to the disgust of elite merchants, whose business houses stood nearby. While white sex workers faced opposition from property owners and received the occasional token police raid, black vice districts faced outright destruction from city authorities. Beale and Gayoso between Second and Hernando Streets became an area of black entertainment and vice because city authorities tolerated it there. Two vice districts which had preceded it fell to intentional arson, police action, and sanitation policies. Authorities believed these areas, known as “Happy Hollow” and “Rotten Row,” bred disease, crime, and black political organization.<sup>119</sup>

Rotten Row emerged as one of three black vice districts after the Civil War. Facing the neo-classical facade of the Gayoso Hotel, and within sight of the city's major cotton firms, the Row constituted a nuisance to the city's merchant class. Here stood one of the most highly traveled streets in the city: businessmen, boatmen, and respectable tourists rubbed elbows in the shadow of the Gayoso hotel. The presence of tumbledown tenements alone projected a bad image for Memphis boosters, but this collection of dwellings resounded nightly with black variety shows, violent rows, and the whooping of drunken prostitutes. Colored madams operated here, occupying tenements scarcely fit for habitation. A black brothel occupied the Germania House, a structure which stood directly across the street from Cotton Row. The *Appeal* complained Rotten Row also developed into a meeting place for black Republicans:

The city is full of country negroes just now. They congregate around Rotten Row, on Shelby street, Hell's Half-Acre, on Gayoso street, and in Fort Pickering, and make night hideous with their orgies. Many of them are in town on a lark, but the majority have been brought here by the Radicals to be used in the coming municipal election.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> *Ledger*, October 19, 1868, June 22, 1871, April 11, 1873, June 21, 1870, September 17, 1867, May 3, 1869, April 26, 1877; *Appeal*, February 16, 1870.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, December 29, 1869.

The residents of this locality lived in squalor, so much so that it witnessed an outbreak of smallpox in 1869. Newspapers linked black vice, radical politics, and filth. In 1870, the *Appeal* suggested the erection of public baths at Rotten Row for the purification of its residents: “If not used to wash the dirty linen of the Radical Party, there are many denizens of that famed locality, whose moral and physical atmosphere would be greatly improved by profound ablutions.” The city inaugurated ablutions when it declared the Row a public nuisance in November of 1869. The city's Sanitary Police forcibly removed Smallpox patients and twelve “wenches” shortly thereafter. Around the same time “some public spirited individual” set Rotten Row on fire. The *Appeal* celebrated the wanton act of arson, commenting “good luck to the man who burnt it!” By 1872 Rotten Row stood empty. Crews removing rubble from the site discovered over a dozen skeletons buried under the slum.<sup>121</sup>

Shortly after the demolition of Rotten Row, many of its denizens relocated to Happy Hollow and Hell's Half Acre. The former locale, a slum north of the landing bounded on all sides by mills and polluted by run-off, attracted attention from the press for its radical politics, interracial sex, and disease. The area frequently flooded after heavy rains, creating stagnant pools that bred mosquitoes and contaminated drinking water. Happy Hollow housed a collection of poor Irish immigrants and freedmen who lived in shacks and shanties constructed out of grounded flatboats. In the minds of many Memphians it came to be most associated with a poor, criminal class of freedmen. A Memphis resident described Happy Hollow as “mostly inhabited by a colony of negroes, whose reputation for cleanliness and sobriety was by no means

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., May 4, 1870, June 19, 1869, April 28, 1872, May 26, 1872. The Sanitary Police was a squad of four inspectors and a sergeant tasked with inspecting slaughterhouses, tenements, boardinghouses, and ferry boats to determine if they constituted a threat to public health. See William H. Bridges, *Digest of the Charter and Ordinance of the City of Memphis from 1826 to 1867, Inclusive* (Bulletin Publishing Company, 1867), 158-160

enviable.”<sup>122</sup>

A number of lower-class white and black prostitutes also lived and worked in the area. Little is known of the houses that operated here, but glimpses in the city papers reveal it as a locality where black men frequented white sex workers. In April of 1866, Metropolitan Police raided on a shanty in Happy Hollow and discovered Mary Sweeney and Martha Candle, white prostitutes, sharing a bed with a black man. The police hauled the women, “who appeared as though they had not washed their faces for a whole month of Sundays,” off for “living in prostitution with negroes.” The press depicted the slum as a breeding ground of disorder and disease that threatened human lives and the body politic of the South. A letter from “KLUX” submitted to the *Appeal* in 1868 spoke of Happy Hollow as a den of radical disorder, where black Republicans issued forth from the slum's “fleshpots” to infect the city with misrule.<sup>123</sup>

Just as black political activity amid the slums of Happy Hollow threatened Democrat rule in Memphis, the diseases bred there threatened the lives of white citizens. Physicians and city officials believed the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1873 originated in the stagnant pools of Happy Hollow. After the epidemic, Memphis authorities began to forcibly remove the inhabitants of the area. No one yet knew that Yellow Fever spread through the bite of a mosquito; many ascribed the cause to filth spread by unsanitary people such as those who inhabited the slum. Y.R. LeMonnier, a surgeon at Charity Hospital in New Orleans, blamed the spread of the Yellow Fever on the “irregular habits” and “dissipation” of the inhabitants of Happy Hollow.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> *Ledger*, June 14, 1872; Denis Alphonsus Quinn, *Heroes and Heroines of Memphis: Or Reminiscences of the Yellow Fever That Afflicted the City of Memphis During the Autumn Months of 1873, 1878, and 1879*, (E.L. Freeman & Son, 1887), 46

<sup>123</sup> *Ledger*, April 18, 1866, October 19, 1868.

<sup>124</sup> Y.R. LeMonnier, “Yellow Fever Epidemic of Memphis, Tenn., in 1873,” *The New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal*, Vol. 1, (Issues 4-6), 674. The notion that dissolute habits and filthy people bred disease was not universally accepted. Dr. William Hewitt dissented with the notion publicly at a sanitation meeting in 1879; he maintained that the demolition and cleaning of Happy Hollow had no effect on preventing Yellow Fever, since the disease had also originated there in 1878, well after it had been “thoroughly cleaned.” See *Appeal*, May 23,

The city offered money to inhabitants in exchange for leaving Happy Hollow, but many refused. A brief court battle erupted after a dozen individuals attempted to secure an injunction against the city's efforts to depopulate the neighborhood. The papers approved of forceful measures. The editor of the *Public Ledger* bluntly recommended that Happy Hollow simply be destroyed: "The best way to dispose of Happy Hollow now would be to remove the occupants therefrom and then remove thereto eight or ten barrels of coal oil, the same to be sprinkled over the shanties and a match applied to each." The city later adopted this plan, sprinkled lime on the ashes, and filled in or drained the stagnant pools.<sup>125</sup>

In short order, authorities destroyed Rotten Row and Happy Hollow, two of the city's three black "tenderloin" districts, on the grounds they bred disorder, disease, and encouraged black political organization. Hell's Half Acre, at the intersection of Gayoso and Desoto, became a central locality for black prostitution in the aftermath of the destruction of these gathering places. The rise of the Gayoso Street vice district in the 1880s, and with it Beale Street, occurred in part because they city decisively demolished the other resorts of black vice.<sup>126</sup>

When not under attack from city authorities, black madams faced attacks from elite blacks who sought to enforce notions of respectability and order in their community. In the late nineteenth century, middle-class discourses of respectability influenced how people of color viewed prostitution. Middle-class respectability called for self-control, thrift, cleanliness, and sexual purity. These traits brought success, and elite blacks hoped, acceptance by respectable

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1879. The notion that people of color, particularly black women, spread disease was the source of anxiety in urban areas throughout the South, particularly Atlanta. See Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, Chapter Nine, "Tuberculosis as the Negro Servants' Disease."

<sup>125</sup> *Appeal*, September 30, 1873, June 24, August 15, 1874, June 7, 1883; *Ledger*, September 15, 1873. Appeal editor J.M. Keating reported that following the 1873 epidemic he visited Happy Hollow and found "four dead bodies lying in one room, and the surroundings were of the most repulsive character. Human excreta and filth of every character was spread around, and the locality was the filthiest place I ever witnessed." See *Appeal*, May 23, 1879 for a discussion of sanitation in light of Yellow Fever.

<sup>126</sup> *Appeal*, March 23, 1876, December 18, 1877.

whites. Elite African Americans attempted to convince working-class blacks of the virtues of clean living through newspapers, churches, and charitable work. Working-class blacks, however, did not entirely embrace these notions. Black elites hoped to use these notions of respectability to legitimate their position as leaders of black communities. Respectability formed what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham calls a “bridge discourse” that connected the black middle-class to their white counterparts and legitimated their claims to be the arbiters of black progress. For black leaders, this could be used to claim civil rights and counter notions of black unsuitability for full citizenship. Through demonstrations of personal and civic virtue, black leaders in Memphis broadcast their respectability not only to working-class and poor blacks, but also to whites in the wider community.<sup>127</sup>

At times, these displays of civic virtue took the form of assaults on black brothels. In 1876, it became widely-known within sporting circles and among those of the black community, that Mary Burton, a mixed-race woman, “stepped out” with George Battier, a white druggist, gambler, and member of the sporting fraternity. Burton, an elite woman of color, received an education at Fisk University and played organ for Beale Street Baptist Church. Her behavior, particularly in the politically volatile atmosphere of Reconstruction-era politics, became the subject of scrutiny by politically-minded black men.<sup>128</sup>

Mary began meeting her paramour at a “call house” on Desoto Street, a place frequented by “disreputable” women and prostitutes. That a member of respectable black society should so disgrace herself angered elite and working-class black men alike. On July 20<sup>th</sup> 1876, a crowd of

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<sup>127</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Harvard University Press, 1993), 197; Cynthia Blair, *I've Got to Make My Livin'*, 187-188.

<sup>128</sup> *Ledger*, July 21, 1876 July 22, 1879; *Appeal*, July 22, 1876. Alfred Froman, Sandy Carter, and Romeo Nelson appear to have been the leaders of a group who followed Mary Burton around town with the intention of exposing her behavior. Burton named them as such and all three were active in Republican party activities during the 1870s and 80s. Froman published a “Radical” paper called *The Planet*. See *Appeal*, March 20, 1875. Froman was a state Republican convention candidate that year. See *Appeal*, August 18, 1876.

black men followed Burton and Battier to No. 32 Desoto Street, a house of assignation kept by Sarah Nooe (or Noel). After Burton and Battier went inside, the crowd, which had grown to upwards of one hundred men and women, gathered outside with lit candles and torches. Crying, “come out of there Mary Burton, your aunt wants you!” the crowd mobbed the house. As Burton attempted to escape, the crowd assaulted her. Several men tore her false braid from her head and attempted to tear off her clothes. The police arrived and loaded her into a police hack on a charge of being an inmate of a house of ill-fame. As the police hack drove away, someone in the crowd cried, “Shoot! Shoot the damned hack, the girl's in it!” Mary Burton's aunt filed charges against the instigators of the incident. Mary named Alfred Froman, a black newspaper editor and Republican operative, as one of the principal leaders of the crowd. Despite the Democratic press making a great deal of hay out of the episode, the leaders of the mob received little more than a slap on the wrist for their assault.<sup>129</sup>

In June of 1889, a group of black leaders that included Ed Shaw and Rev. Taylor Nightingale, met at Beale Street Baptist Church to discuss a plan to “overthrow the social evil.” Ed Shaw, a lawyer and politician, commented to a reporter that he and his compatriots wanted to “root out the foulest blot on the character of the American negro – the loose morals of his womankind.” Shaw took part in the mobbing of Mary Burton years before. Shaw also defended Alfred Froman in court against charges of rioting and disorderly conduct against Mary Burton and Sarah Nooe.<sup>130</sup>

Days later, 600 black men met at the Beale Street Baptist Church to discuss what to do

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<sup>129</sup> *Avalanche*, July 30, 1876; Burton maintained that Nooe's home was not a house of assignation, but that she had merely stopped there to help Nooe, who was illiterate, read a letter. That Nooe's home was a house of assignation is supported by some evidence, but not confirmed. The block on which Nooe's house stood was dotted with several known houses of assignation in the 1880s. See the *Biennial Report of the Fire and Police Commissioners of the Taxing District of Shelby County, Tennessee, For the Years 1889 and 1890* (S.C. Toof, 1891), 239.

<sup>130</sup> *Avalanche*, June 25, 1889; *Appeal*, March 20, 1875.

about the “social evil” in their community. The meeting drafted a resolution couched in the language of middle-class respectability: “We find colored men and colored women and white men and colored women living in illegal cohabitation,” a situation which the members of the meeting found “insulting and revolting to our wives, ourselves, daughters.” The resolution continued:

On behalf of the better class of this community who emulate virtue and whose own pure lives offer an indignant protest against this open and notorious lewdness . . . banish from our midst these places of shame and ruin.<sup>131</sup>

The resolution attacked intra-racial prostitution and also challenged white men who fathered illegitimate children with black sex workers. The prevention of race mixing formed one of the chief goals of the association. Rev. Nightingale commented, “we do not want social equality, and shall insist upon the absolute isolation and separation of the races.” Thomas F. Cassells, a black Republican politician, criticized the meeting as foolish: “They're fools to waste their time trying to reform Negro women who prefer dishonor and degraded white men to respectability with a husband of their own race.” Meanwhile, the prostitutes of Gayoso Street learned of the intent of the association. As organizer Ed Shaw left the meeting a group of angry black sex workers nearly mobbed him.<sup>132</sup>

The group that met at Beale called themselves the Grand Union Fraternity, but became popularly known as the “Black Caps,” in emulation of the activities of the white supremacist organization of a similar name. They stopped black sex workers on the street, halted carriages,

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<sup>131</sup> *Ledger*, June 27, 1889.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.* Preston Lauterbach overstates the degree to which this resolution was about race mixing, when it was clearly in opposition to all forms of prostitution, whether intra or interracial. The focus of the white media, unsurprisingly, was almost exclusively on white men who were arrested and humiliated by black magistrates. Much of the activity of the “Black Caps,” however, was directed at black sex workers.



and arrested sex workers and customers. Armed black men carried out this activity. They intended to not only separate the races, but to place patriarchal controls on black women.<sup>133</sup>

The “Black Cap” vigilante action lasted for a short time, but fizzled due to President Hadden's opposition to their activities. An attempt to assert black middle-class patriarchal control failed in the face of white patriarchal dominance. Hadden, who protected prostitutes, opposed any action, legal or extra-legal, which might tend to undermine an important base of his support. After Hadden prosecuted a high-ranking Black Cap, the movement disappeared.<sup>134</sup>

Black leaders like Alfred Froman, Ed Shaw, and Reverend Nightingale gambled on claiming middle-class respectability by attacking black women who engaged in illicit sexual activity. But power in Memphis did not come from middle-class respectability. Power rested in the hands of men who made common cause with gamblers and prostitutes. Men like Robert Church understood this. He realized that respectability was a matter of public deportment, not how you made your money. As Reconstruction faded from memory and white control over the city became firmly reestablished, elite black madams such as Grace Stanley became fixtures of the Memphis sex trade.

### **The Financial Success of Brothel Operators**

Did madams attain financial success? As indicated by personal estates, prostitution developed into a profitable industry for some madams. On average, Memphis madams held more

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<sup>133</sup> Lauterbach describes the activities of the Black Caps as a “terror.” This is an overstatement. The only instance of violence Lauterbach cites, that of Tom Anderson beating Josephine Little, is ambiguous. Lauterbach fails to mention another police report which describes Anderson as a “stranger” in town who would not give a reason for why he beat Little. It is likely that Anderson was a countryman or boatman who attacked Little in a drunken rage. See *Ledger*, July 15, 1889.

<sup>134</sup> *Ledger*, August 7, 9, 1889.

personal property and real estate than most Memphis women. In 1860, roughly 130 Memphis sex workers possessed \$27,250 total in personal property. Of this amount, ninety percent belonged to seven successful madams. As a comparison, the total value of the personal estates of 1,084 women in the First Ward totaled \$161,090. Of that total, \$83,000 belonged to four women. This indicates that madams constituted a fairly wealthy class in their own right. Much of this, however, madams had tied up in deeds of trust to make secure the payment of debt. Documents from the 1860s demonstrate that madams often went into debt to repair their brothels, purchase furniture, or pay lawyer and court fees. In these instances, madams put up their furniture or other movable goods as security to ensure the payment of debts. Despite this, madams did not have a great deal of trouble paying down their debt. A lack of trustee sales featuring the property of brothel keepers indicates grantors seldom executed warranty deeds.<sup>135</sup>

But most brothel operators did not remain in business long and do not appear to have made large sums of money. Disruption brought on by war and disease made establishments difficult to maintain for more than a year or two. Of the twenty madams who operated in Memphis between 1858 and 1860, only five managed to remain in business in the Bluff City at the end of the Civil War. The other fifteen women either left or received banishment at the hands of Union authorities. Another twenty-nine women quickly replaced these women by 1867. Only six of the women who began managing brothels in 1866 and 1867 remained in business by 1870. Another nine madams operated establishments by 1870; of these five remained in business more than two years. The disruption brought on by the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1873 played a role in closing at least two of these brothels by 1874. Of this third wave, only two brothel proprietors

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<sup>135</sup> This data is derived from the 1860 U.S. Federal Census, Memphis, Shelby, Tennessee. The seven madams in question are Jennie Taylor, Helen Blanche, Bridget Fitzsimmons, Margaret Keller, Elizabeth Whithers, Puss Pettus, and Margaret Mitchell.

remained in operation for more than five years. The short duration of most madams' careers in the city developed out of large disruptions such as disease and war, but also the unsettled and demanding nature of the trade. Out of 92 women who worked in brothel management between 1850 and 1900, only ten remained in business in Memphis ten years or more. This is testament to the disruptions of the Civil War and two Yellow Fever epidemics in 1873 and 1878.<sup>136</sup>

On average, madams operated brothels in the Bluff City for two and a half years before moving on to another city, returning to the ranks of regular sex workers, dying, or for some other reason leaving the sex trade. Most commonly, women ran small establishments for a year or less and then disappeared from newspaper and arrest records. The short duration of most brothel operators' careers suggests the Bluff City may have been a place of transit for madams. Its smaller size, relative to New Orleans and St. Louis, made it a difficult market to carve out a niche. Women worked in Memphis for a period of time and then moved to other cities.

Memphis produced a small number of long-term brothel operators, however. Nettie White operated two brothels in Memphis between 1867 and 1896, making her career in brothel management the longest and most stable in the city. White began her career in Memphis as madam of a small frame house at 99 Market Square. After five years of managing that location she became the manager of the “Mansion House” at 34 Gayoso, regarded as the most exclusive bordello in the city. For White, this first move resulted from her success at brothel management. White's tenure at the “Mansion House” lasted another five years, at which time she sold her furniture and returned to her smaller former place of business at 99 Market Square. Downgrading from the “Mansion,” which rented for \$125.00 a month to the house at Market Square, which rented for thirty-five dollars, may have been the result of a downturn in business, the loss of

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<sup>136</sup> Tracing these 92 women over the course of fifty years involved consulting the U.S. Federal Census, newspapers, and Memphis directories.

police protection, or a host of other factors. By the mid-1890s white regained her place as the mistress of the Mansion. By the turn of the century, however, she disappeared from the historical record.<sup>137</sup>

Of those who stayed for long periods of time, there is little evidence for them amassing great fortunes. An appraisal of seventeen madams with extant financial details reveals a total accumulation of roughly \$50,000 in personal property and real estate. This falls well below the wealth of famous madams such as Mary Ann Hall, who built a fortune of \$87,000 with her brothel in Washington, D.C. The more successful madams in Memphis lived at a level of comfort comparable to those in the middle-class. The executor for the estate of Emily Sutton (Fanny Walker) noted that she possessed “one lot of evening apparel such as is customary for a woman of moderate means.” Sutton had been a particularly successful madam prior to her death in the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1873. This success had brought her a life of “moderate means,” which meant a measure of economic independence, but not wealth.<sup>138</sup>

Memphians, however, still perceived madams as wealthy. Rumor, fueled in part by the newspapers, but also by the extravagant clothing and jewelry worn by madams, exaggerated the worth of their estates. Memphians believed Grace Stanley to be worth \$30,000, but R.M. Banks owned her furnishings, which he imported from Europe. Stanley owned only her jewelry, clothing, and house. An *Appeal* reporter believed Blanch Curry, who operated a house on Market Square, worth \$20,000. After her death, all of Curry's movable property went by train to her sister in Dresden Tennessee, and never received a proper appraisal. Most of this being furniture,

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<sup>137</sup> *Appeal*, October 15, 1867; *Sholes' Memphis Directory for 1884* (A.E. Sholes, 1884), 553. *Sholes' Directory of the City of Memphis, for 1878* (A.E. Sholes, 1878), 463;

<sup>138</sup> The figure of 50,000 is based on census record valuations in the 1860 U.S. Federal Census and probate records; Pauline Livingstone probate record, 1880-05444; Susan Powell probate 1876-02631, SCA; Mattie Jackson probate record, 1880-06262, SCA; Annie Cook probate record, 1878-03231, SCA; Sarah Gaynor probate record, 1876-01403, SCA; Emily Sutton probate record, 1873-01690, SCA.; Louisa Fisher probate record, 1875-02355, SCA; Margaret Hayden probate record, 1870-01117, SCA.

it could not have been worth more than \$10,000. Curry's two houses, 109 and 111 Market Square, which probably made up the bulk of her wealth, could not even be sold or rented to reputable people, which severely limited their resale value.<sup>139</sup>

The typical worth of a successful Memphis madam at the end of her career stood in the thousands rather than the tens of thousands. The notion that madams possessed great wealth developed from the image they successfully concocted: bejeweled fingers, expensive clothing, and mortgaged furniture gave off the look of wealth. But like middle-class respectability, their affluence was a product of a studied veneer. In Memphis, success for a madam was largely defined by staying alive, staying on top of payments for furnishings bought on credit, paying rent, and paying bribes to city officials and police. Economic independence, such as it was, consisted of a myriad of obligations to creditors and a daily struggle to maintain one's place in a cutthroat trade.

Given their lives could be so cutthroat, some madams simply left the trade without having made a fortune. Rosalie Pavid faced stabbing at the hands of a rival and a brutal assault by drunken toughs. She left the brothel world in 1867 and worked at a textile mill in Augusta, Georgia for decades. She may have returned occasionally to Memphis to visit the grave of her husband, but kept clear of her old haunts. Pavid spent the remainder of her old age as a matron of a rescue home for “fallen women” in Augusta.<sup>140</sup>

In 1901, a boarder stabbed Grace Stanley five times in the lungs with a stiletto knife. For days she hovered between life and death. Short of a miracle, her doctors believed she would die. But Stanley recovered, despite a punctured lung, and returned to her work. This brush with death,

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<sup>139</sup> *Appeal*, June 3, 1901; Kate L. Puris to R.M. Banks, Book 269, pg. 25, SCA; Mattie Jackson probate record, 1880-06262, SCA.

<sup>140</sup> 1900 United States Federal Census, Population Schedule, Richmond, Augusta, Georgia, 5. Many of the details of the life of Rosalie Pavid were graciously provided by Hattie Wilcox, her 3x great granddaughter.

however, clearly affected her. Grace became more deeply interested in religion and in the state of her soul. She left prostitution and moved to a modest home on Arnold Place in South Memphis. She lived out the rest of her days “worthily and peacefully” as a member of the Pentecostal Church.<sup>141</sup>

By the time Grace Stanley moved to her house on Arnold Place, the glory days of Memphis brothels had come to an end. City authorities shuttered the city's vice districts during World War One out of concern for the health of soldiers. Although brothels reopened after the war, they were a shadow of what they had once been. Those that remained operated on the south side of town, particularly along Mulberry Street. Madams encountered greater municipal intrusion into their operations following the World War One, particularly during election time when incumbent politicians demanded all brothels cease playing music and selling liquor. Acting on the orders of Crump's machine, madams sent their girls to vote for the candidates operatives told them to. The city also offered regular medical inspections to prostitutes. The city effectively managed prostitution, sapping it of it what flashiness it once possessed.<sup>142</sup>

New business owners transformed 121 and 234 Gayoso, where Grace Stanley operated her palaces of sin, into a bicycle repair shop and a boardinghouse. At least two of the old brownstones on Gayoso Street remained standing into the 1950s. Their second lives as working-class boardinghouses came to an end during the wave of urban renewal that swept through Memphis in the 1960s and 70s. The Iron Clad, the city's oldest bordello, fell before a wrecking ball during the early twentieth century. At mid-century the city paved over the lot to make way for the construction of I-40. An entrepreneur turned the Mansion House, the most celebrated of the city's brothels, into a restaurant and cafe, but by the 1950s it too had been torn down. Today,

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<sup>141</sup> *Appeal*, June 3, 1901; Lee, *Beale Street*, 118.

<sup>142</sup> W.C. Williams, *Survey of Commercialized Prostitution in Memphis* (Tennessee Health Department, 1938), SCA.

a parking garage stands on the site. Only a small plaque in an alley marks the spot where the Mansion stood.<sup>143</sup>

For a period of half a century, madams occupied a central place in the nightlife and culture of Memphis. Madams built not just whorehouses, but entertainment venues that catered to a male-dominated world of urban amusement. Possessing considerable business skill and contacts among wealthy men, a small class of these women established themselves in relative security from prosecution by legal authorities. Their success depended upon presenting their establishments as charming domestic spaces that existed solely for the pleasure of white men. As Nell Kimball wrote in her memoirs, “the difference between a two dollar hooker and the fifty dollar tart is just the surroundings and a myth.” The creation of this myth required participation in consumerism, which only further strengthened the economic ties between madams and the city's merchants. The fortunes of Memphis rose and fell on brothel beds, literally and figuratively.<sup>144</sup>

But not every woman who set out to transform herself into prominent parlor house mistress achieved success. The dross of the brothel world collected at the margins of the city, in run-down shebangs and moldering tenement houses. This particularly became the case for women of color, who encountered greater opposition from city authorities and locals. This began to change, however, with the reestablishment of white supremacy in the late nineteenth century, when glittering Gayoso Street houses overseen by women of color flourished for almost two

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<sup>143</sup> James B. Jones, Jr. “Municipal Vice: The Management of Prostitution in Tennessee's Urban Experience. Part I: The Experience of Nashville and Memphis, 1854-1917,” 33-41; *R.L. Polk & Co.'s Memphis Directory 1917*, 1689; In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, 34 Gayoso became 112 and 114 Gayoso, which by 1950 had been transformed into the Gayoso Grill. The fate of these structures was determined through examining Sanborn-Perris Map Company, *Fire Insurance Maps for Memphis, Tennessee* for 1907, 1927, and 1952. The only remaining structure in Memphis from the nineteenth century that was once occupied by a brothel is the Woolen Building on Howard's Row at the corner of Union and Front.

<sup>144</sup> Nell Kimball, 252.

decades.

Madams as a class lived in a world of calculated dissimulation, of myth built on furniture, décor, and images of the domestic and exotic. Madams lied to young women about the pleasures of the sex worker's life, just as they lied to men about who they were. Madams and sex workers concocted personae, often calculated to match the domestic image projected by a plush parlor, but often to hide from a past snapping at their heels. Sex workers lied about their profits, to reporters, to their families, and to themselves. And after all, was this not the essence of consumer capitalism? Purchasing an identity that, when coupled with enough consumer trappings, took on an air of verisimilitude? As madam Pauline Livingstone put it, women of her class told lies “purely for the pleasure of lying.”<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>145</sup>*Appeal*, June 1, 1884.



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