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William Faulkner's Memphis: Architectural Identity, Urban Edge Condition, and Prostitution in 1905 Memphis

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**WILLIAM FAULKNER'S MEMPHIS:
ARCHITECTURAL IDENTITY, URBAN EDGE CONDITION, AND
PROSTITUTION IN 1905 MEMPHIS**

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Abstract:

*It has been said by wags that Memphis (Tennessee) is the largest city in Mississippi. Unquestionably, Memphis is the commercial and cultural capital of the Mississippi River delta country north of Vicksburg. As such it figures prominently in the works of southern writers, especially William Faulkner. Faulkner's characters seek out Memphis as a place of excitement and escape. This paper deals with Faulkner's description of Memphis as it existed in the early decades of the twentieth century; the focus is on passages of *The Reivers*, but passages from other works are included as well. Because so many of the events he portrays deal with the exploits of young male characters, the red light district of Memphis (called the Tenderloin) receives particular attention. However, other portions of the city—the downtown area and the cotton offices that filled the buildings on Front Street facing the river are included as well. An interesting picture of the mid-south's major Metropolis as it existed some one hundred years ago emerges.*

For William Faulkner, Mississippi “begins in the lobby of a Memphis, Tennessee hotel” and ends at the Gulf of Mexico.¹ This statement, loaded with meaning, carries great significance when analyzing Faulkner’s treatment of Memphis in his works. It is possible Faulkner “reived” this characterization from the sociologist David L. Cohn. In his 1935 study of the Mississippi Delta, *God Shakes Creation*, Cohn says, “the Mississippi Delta begins in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel and ends on Catfish Row in Vicksburg.”² Whether or not Faulkner was familiar with Cohn’s work is inconsequential. What is noteworthy is that they share the awareness of the importance of Memphis on Mississippi. This, in turn, sheds light on Faulkner’s use of Memphis in his Yoknapatawpha works and on the value that his characters place on it. Indeed, the narrator of Faulkner’s *The Reivers* (1962) speaking of Memphis says, “Where else could anyone in north Mississippi want to go.”³

In the 1830s, the State of Mississippi contested its state line with Tennessee, saying that it had been drawn too far to the south. Nevertheless, Memphis should have been a part of Mississippi.

This assertion was fallacious and was quickly squelched, but this attempt was not the last of Memphis’s trying to break from Tennessee and unite with north Mississippi. As Memphis historian Gerald M. Capers claims, the people of Memphis wanted to be a part of Mississippi so that its cotton would receive the higher ratings that Mississippi cotton garnered.⁴ The people of Memphis also were displeased with their status in Tennessee and their treatment by the Nashville government, a condition that continued in Memphis history. Memphis sought to form a new state, which was to include portions of west Kentucky, west Tennessee, and north Mississippi. It was to be named Jackson, Chickasaw, or Memphis, with Memphis being the favorite choice. The popular Andrew Jackson even supported it.⁵ No attempt was made, though, at realizing the goal until the issue was reintroduced in 1841. After much debate the measure was defeated in the Tennessee legislature.⁶

By the turn of the twentieth century, Memphis was being called the capital of north Mississippi because of the great flux of Mississippians who were populating Memphis. In 1900 there were 14,600 Memphis citizens who had been born in Mississippi.⁷ Not only was Memphis siphoning population from the Mississippi countryside, it also enticed Mississippi residents to frequent its hotels and numerous saloons. Many farmers from the surrounding countryside took an annual or biannual escapade to Memphis as a celebration, probably corresponding to planting or harvest.⁸

One such excursion is the framework around which William Faulkner’s comedic masterpiece and last novel, the last of his fourteen Yoknapatawpha novels, *The Reivers*, is built. In a May 3, 1940, letter to Robert Haas, Faulkner’s editor since *Light in August* (1932), Faulkner outlined what would become *The Reivers* twenty-two years before its publication:

It is a sort of Huck Finn—a normal boy of about twelve or thirteen [Lucius Priest], a big warmhearted, courageous, honest, utterly unreliable white man with the mentality of a child [Boon Hoggenbeck], an old negro family servant, opinionated, querulous, selfish, fairly unscrupulous, and in his second childhood

[Ned McCaslin], and a prostitute, not very young anymore, and with a great deal of character and generosity and commonsense [Miss Corrie], and a stolen race horse which none of them actually intended to steal.⁹

This original conception developed into the nostalgic retelling of a parentally unapproved childhood trip to Memphis in 1905 and the comedic mania that ensues after the characters, from Faulkner's fictional Jefferson, Mississippi, are stranded in Memphis with a possibly stolen, mediocre racehorse. These characters are stereotypical not only of Faulkner's own work (especially since most had already appeared in other works) but also of Southerners in general. This makes the story and places presented in it representative of the South, so that the view of Memphis it presents is not only a view of a specific place and time, but representative of Southern cities and how they relate to the surrounding (stereo)typically rural South. Both the specific and the symbolic nature of the city and the characters that visit it will be taken into account in this paper.



Figure 1. Bales of cotton being loaded on a riverboat at Memphis's Cotton Row, 1910.

One of the specific qualities of 1905 Memphis is the importance it held for Mississippians, who with Memphians relied on Mississippi lumber and cotton flowing into Memphis, the great distribution center. (Fig. 1) (Mississippi was producing a fourth of US cotton much of which passed through Memphis).¹⁰ Its central location for the rural farmers of the surrounding area provides a context for arriving at an informed understanding of how Memphis functions in William Faulkner's Memphis works. By looking deeper into *The Reivers* (augmented by several of his other works in which Memphis plays a role) we see what Faulkner, through the voice of his character Lucius Priest (the first person narrator), underscores as the notable qualities that constitute the urban fabric of Memphis; a portrait of the Memphis of 1905 emerges. As *The Reivers* was written in 1962 when Faulkner was only eight, it is set in 1905. Its depiction of

Memphis has the potential to be an historically inaccurate portrayal or one that exaggerates certain aspects or phenomena. Whether it is perfectly rendered by accurate historic detail is not as important as the lasting image of Memphis Faulkner provides for the reader, who, probably has never experienced Memphis personally and could never experience the Memphis of 1905—a turning point in the city's development because it was then, despite fires and plagues, that the city's built form began to try to catch up to the growth that had resulted from New South Boosterism and industrialization.

Three pervading characteristics that contribute to 1905 Memphis's urban identity surface in *The Reivers* and other works: the blurred edge condition of south Memphis where the line between the rural and the urban is ambiguous (and is inextricably tied to the differing experiential qualities when entering Memphis by train or by automobile as described in chapter five of *The Reivers*); the implied problem or condition of Memphis's lack of an architectural or symbolic presence that constituted a recognizable identity of place in the built fabric; and the pervasive subject of prostitution and the effect it has on built space, in both the individual house and the tenderloin area, as well as on the perception of place. This paper's exploration of these issues compares the descriptions that Faulkner and his characters from *The Reivers* and other works provide to the historical representation of Memphis—a view legitimized by the lens of history. This is enlightening because it reveals whether Faulkner was exaggerating "reality" to stress an idea or the conditions that make up the urban image of Memphis or whether he was realistically describing Memphis which would imply that he was concerned with an historical recreation that lends a certain reality to his characters and their interactions with the city. Another point of consideration is that Faulkner's portrayal of 1905 Memphis in *The Reivers* is filtered through a view of Memphis as he saw it in 1960, just as other Faulkner works set in the Memphis of the past reflected a bias resulting from his contemporary view of the city.

While examining the specific phenomena of urban form and culture that are addressed in *The Reivers* and other Faulkner works, it is important to evaluate the role Memphis plays for the characters—how it changes or has changed them and how they comprehend the city. Adding this layer to the analysis not only allows the investigation of the salient qualities Faulkner describes, but also provides a contextual treatment of characters' interaction with the city. This undercurrent allows many questions to be raised that would have otherwise remained in the background.

Three of the four main characters are rural inhabitants of Jefferson, Mississippi. Their experience and perception of Memphis is not only affected by their not having a routine acquaintance with the city, but also by their rural and agricultural perspective of space and human interaction—a point that is paramount in a discussion of Faulkner and Southern cities. The three rural characters, Lucius Priest, Boon Hoggenbeck, and Ned

McCaslin, have a change in behavior or engage in activities that they would not have considered in their home town of Jefferson. They visit a trashy and low-class whorehouse in the Memphis Tenderloin district and trade Lucius's grandfather's automobile for a possibly stolen racehorse, and the young boy, Lucius, starts a fight with a fifteen-year-old boy in which he gets cut with a knife.¹¹ The fourth character, Miss Corrie, the prostitute from Arkansas, lived in Memphis for several years. Her experience of Memphis, as well as how Memphis effects her in the novel, is less important than how it has changed her and how her interactions with these rural characters change her again.

The trip to Memphis that the characters take is preceded by four chapters that build up to their departure. This lengthy prologue provides the background for the trip, including devices of character development as well as the introduction of the infamous Wynton Flyer (Lucius's grandfather's automobile). More importantly, in terms of studying the characters' interactions with Memphis, this introductory section functions to situate the characters in a rural context that contrasts with their experience in Memphis; it also heightens the anticipation, for the characters as well as the reader, of the impending impromptu excursion.

The destination of Boon's and Lucius's scheme (or the look they give each other that instantaneously provides for the two a plan of action) is not initially revealed. Lucius discloses the destination by saying "that's right, Memphis as our destination has never been mentioned, either to you [Lucius is narrating to his grandson] or between Boon and me. Why should it have been? Where else did we have to go?"¹² This speaks to the importance of Memphis to north Mississippians as it is the only large city in the area; it also implies that there is something, some quality or attraction, that Memphis possesses that their town, Jefferson, does not. This implication is seemingly trivial and obvious, but it begins to address the distinction that must be proffered in any urban study between the city and country as to what it means to be a city or urban center in the American South. This question, which is a central issue in this study, logically leads to an analysis of the physical attributes of Faulkner's Memphis in contrast to those of Faulkner's Jefferson for answers to why some of the qualities attributed to Memphis are given such prominence in the narrative.

To begin a comprehensive analysis of the contrasts between Jefferson and Memphis, it is necessary to provide some background by investigating the rural/urban dialectic in the South and the manner in which it is addressed in *The Reivers*. For Faulkner, the cities of the North were "rootless ephemeral cities"¹³ that were filled with smoking factories. Perhaps his depiction of Memphis is a critique of what he sees as the invasive modernization of the Southern city. The sprawl of Memphis into the countryside that he describes could be a criticism of the invasive city bleeding into Faulkner's beloved forests of north Mississippi—a condition that he mourned in many of his works. Here is how Lucius describes his experience of nearing Memphis:

The very land itself seemed to have changed. The farms were bigger, more prosperous, with tighter fences and painted houses and even bars; the very air was urban The cotton and corn [grew] unvexed now, the mules themselves sabbatical and idle in the pastures, the people still in their Sunday clothes on galleries and in shady yards We went on. Civilization was now constant: single country stores and crossroads hamlets, we were barely free of one before here was another; commerce was rife about us, the air was indeed urban, the very dust itself which we raised and moved in had a metropolitan taste to tongue and nostrils ... Then the country itself was gone. There were no longer intervals between the houses and shops and stores; suddenly before us was a wide tree-bordered and ordered boulevard with car-tracks in the middle; and sure enough there was the street car itself ... We were getting close to Main street now—the tall buildings, the stores, the hotels....¹⁴

This is *less* of a critique of the invasive modern city than simply an accurate portrayal of Memphis in 1905. What is important here, though, is the transition between the rural South and the city. Faulkner describes two emblems of the rural South: the country store and crossroad hamlets. Their increased frequency alone alerts the boy that they were on the edge of the city. In Faulkner's short story, "Two Soldiers," Memphis is described as "set up on one edge of a field."¹⁵ In the description in *The Reivers*, the three visitors pass seamlessly from fields of cotton to crossroads after crossroads to the tall buildings of Memphis. This transition zone is a result of the sprawling tendency of turn-of-the-century Memphis. In the 1890s, members of the upper-middle class began relocating to the eastern edges of Memphis.¹⁶ The annexation of 1899 quadrupled the size of Memphis.¹⁷ It expanded the city limits mostly to the east and the south.¹⁸ The settlers of most of these annexed territories, excluding the more upper-class areas around Annesdale and Overton Parks, were rural immigrants.¹⁹ Historian William D. Miller suggests that at the turn-of-the-century the "bearers and preservers of the city's cultural heritage" were displaced by these rural immigrants resulting in a change in the urban culture of Memphis.²⁰ If the makeup of the population in 1900 was half rural immigrants,²¹ and they were changing the culture of the city to a peculiar blending of rural and urban, (a considerable shift from the relatively cosmopolitan roots of Memphis),²² then the blending of rural and urban architectural attributes upon entering the city reflects its populace's composition.

Lucius's description of entering the city and its blurred edge condition raises an important issue—the way the introduction of the automobile changed the way the characters experience and perceive the city. Memphis, beginning in the 1850s, was the central terminal of four new railroad lines from the east to the Mississippi River Valley.²³ From the 1850s onward, Memphis increasingly became an important rail hub for the South. Much of its earlier growth was contingent upon the

expansion of the railroads. In several of Faulkner's works, characters visit Memphis, arriving by train. Lucius's description of entering Memphis by car contrasts significantly with the experiences of other characters arriving by train. Though accounts, in Faulkner, of traveling to Memphis by train allude to the blurred edge or sprawling nature of southern Memphis, the speed and isolation of train travel gives the impression that one is traveling through the country and is suddenly thrust into the city. The new experience of entering Memphis by car, allows Lucius to notice the subtle changes between the rural South with which he is familiar and the urban South. He senses this change, not in the built environment, but in an indescribable quality, so intangible that Faulkner reverts to its depiction as a smell. Once in the city, Lucius understands the urban South by the differences between it and his home town Jefferson; however the transition zone, thanks to the greater phenomenological understanding that the automobile affords, is seen as blurred.



Figure 2. Main Street, 1906.

Upon entry into Memphis, Lucius notes, not explicitly but rather by exclusion, the plain, homogenous urban fabric of Memphis—a fabric that lacks a true architectural identity that would give Memphis a distinctive sense of place. (Fig. 2) The lack of an architectural, physical, or visual symbol to which the characters might relate and the mostly banal architectural character of the city is buttressed by nearly every account of Memphis in Faulkner's other works. Paradoxically, the distinguishing condition that emanates from Faulkner's writings of Jefferson or Yoknapatawpha County is a sense of place. The importance of the physical presence and the meaningful semiotic recognition of the square and courthouse of Jefferson provided in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha oeuvre is in stark contrast with the impression that Memphis is a non-place. This judgement is made not in the sense that Marc Auge suggests²³ but rather in practical terms—an early Modern equivalent—for we must recognize Faulkner's disdain for modernization and homogeneity. He exuded this contempt in works such as *Go Down, Moses* (1942),²⁴ which

traces, from the time of their virginity to their complete destruction, the history of the destruction of the forests of north Mississippi resulting from the onslaught of modernization in the South. Faulkner argued vehemently against Southern homogenization with what he saw as the increasing lack of diversity in the United States.²⁵

In his least appreciated Yoknapatawpha novel, *Requiem for a Nun* (1951), Faulkner devotes the prose portion (the other half is in play form) of his narrative to a description and historical explanation of the town of Jefferson. The town is treated with the same importance that the main characters in the dramatic section in his hybrid novel are given. As in all Faulkner works set in Jefferson, the town square and courthouse comprise the stage upon which many significant events occur. Similarly in the haunting climatic ending of *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), they



Figure 3. The first Lafayette County Courthouse at Oxford, a Civil War bivouac on its grounds.

act as a signifier of place and meaning with which citizens of Jefferson visually associate. Speaking of the significance (which is tied very directly to the architectural pedigree of the building) of the courthouse in Jefferson, Faulkner said, "There was no town until there was a courthouse, and no courthouse until... [it was] transmogrified into a by-neo-Greek-out-of-Georgian-England edifice set in the center of what in time would be the town square."²⁶ (Fig. 3) He defines the square as the city as well as the county center, describing it as "a Square, the courthouse in its grove the center; quadrangular around it, the stores, two story, the offices of the lawyers and doctors and dentists, the lodge-rooms and auditoriums, above them; school and church and tavern and bank and jail each in its ordered place; the four broad diverging avenues straight as plumb-lines in the four

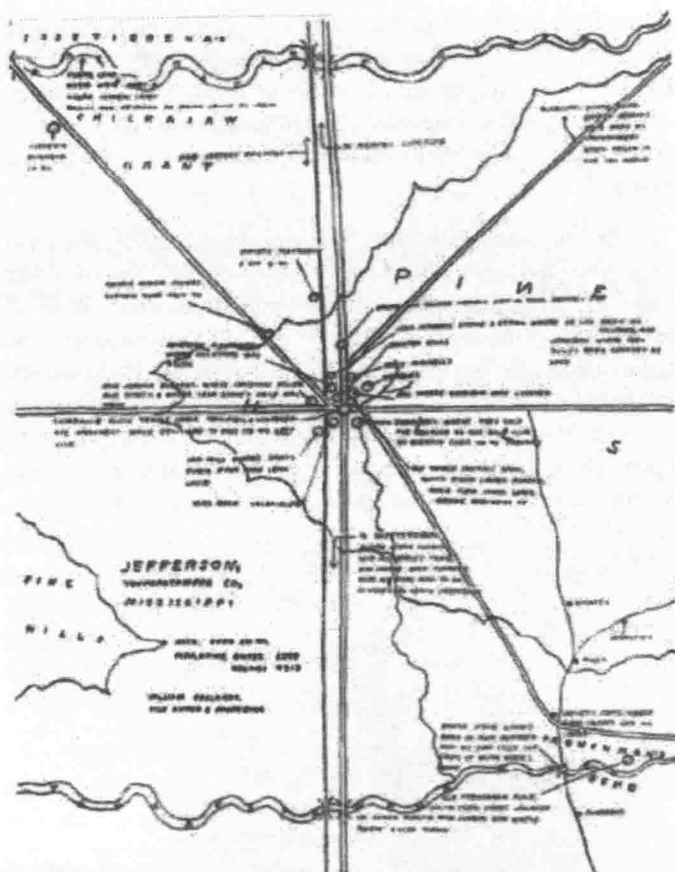


Figure 4. Faulkner's fictional map of Jefferson (modeled after Oxford, MS) showing the location of events from Faulkner's novels and all roads converging on the courthouse at the center of the county.

directions becoming the network of roads and by-roads until the whole county would be covered with it"²⁷ (Fig. 4) Furthering the image of square and courthouse as center he notes that "above all, the courthouse—the center, the focus, the hub; [sits] looming in the center of the county's circumference, like a single cloud in its ring of horizon, laying its vast shadow to the uttermost rim of horizon."²⁸ Faulkner's novel *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), closely related in chronology and content to *Requiem*, portrays the square as a stage on which events play out. He even goes so far to compare it to an amphitheatre.²⁹

The urban fabric of Memphis, in *The Reivers*, is not described with any one building, or even a square, constituting a city center. No location is imparted with the semiotic or cultural significance of the Square of Jefferson. Memphis side streets, particularly the streets around Gayoso Street, named after Manuel Gayoso, the Spanish founder of a fort near Memphis, and Beale Street, near their intersections with Second and Third Streets³⁰, are described as flanked by saloons and composed of "houses that didn't look old or new either."³¹ (Fig. 5) In "Two Soldiers," Memphis is presented, through the eyes of a small boy who had never visited it, as only a mass of people and cars with a nondescript architecture.³² One might assume that a country boy that had never seen skyscrapers would be in awe, but Faulkner



Figure 5. Main Street and Gayoso Street, 1910.

omits all references to tall buildings. The most explicit example of Faulkner's opinion of Memphis comes from his third Yoknapatawpha novel, *Sanctuary* (1931). He describes Memphis as a city of "smoke-grimed frame houses with tiers of wooden galleries, set a little back in grassless plots with now and then a forlorn and hardy tree of some shabby species—gaunt, lopbranched magnolias, a stunted elm or a locust in grayish, cadaverous bloom—interspersed by rear ends of garages" that from the gloom evoked "a sinister and meaningless photograph poorly made"³³ (Fig. 6)

The majority of Faulkner's writings on Memphis involve the red-light district and the poorer southern sections of Memphis. Faulkner's description of the depressing state of the Memphis red-light district is similar to the impressions of the business district found in other writings of the time. *The Ladies Home Journal* in 1906 contained an article, "Eyesores that Spoil Memphis," that included many photographs.³⁴ The business district was especially "drab and depressing [in] appearance."³⁵ Most of the buildings were four stories tall and were "old, unpainted, unattractive" brick buildings.³⁶ (Fig. 2) *The Commercial Appeal* even went so far as to say that Main Street was a "horselot" and that Memphis was like a "country town."³⁷

Civic leaders, noting the unimpressive and dispersed business district of Memphis, in a frenzy began to improve the downtown area and to consolidate it giving it a central preeminence.³⁸ In the time period in which *The Reivers* is set, much of the central business district, especially at the center of Main Street and Madison Avenue, was sold to commercial developers. Many of the taller buildings of Memphis were built around this central location in the subsequent years. (Fig. 7) In 1905, however, few large buildings were in existence. The Continental Bank Building (now the D.T. Porter Building), the first steel-framed building, eleven stories tall, was built in 1895³⁹ and was one of the few tall buildings in Memphis in 1905. (Fig. 8)



Figure 6. An alley off Gayoso Street.



Figure 7. Court Square; in the background are the buildings that surround the intersection of Main Street and Madison Avenue, 1906.

One of the few instances of Faulkner describing the business district occurs in his short story, "Dull Tale." The story is set in the 1920s so it describes the changes made in the business district since its lackluster appearance in 1905: "Where Madison Avenue joins Main Street, where the trolleys swing crashing and groaning



Figure 8. Continental Bank Building on Madison Avenue, built 1885.

down the hill at the clanging of bells which warn and consummate the change of light from red to green, Memphis is almost a city." Continuing to describe the intersection, Faulkner says it was "where four tall buildings quarter their flanks and form an upended tunnel up which the diapason of traffic echoes as at the bottom of a well, there is the restless life and movement of cities; the hurrying purposeful going to-and-for."⁴⁰ Faulkner's perception of the Memphis business district as presented here stands in stark contrast to his and to historians' depiction of the Memphis of 1905.

Before the commercial development and definition of city center that the business district underwent in the 1910s, Memphis lacked a central focus. The lack of a fixed center and the reality of a monotonous and dreary urban fabric positioned Memphis as the antithesis of Jefferson. Faulkner, with his cited distaste for the modern, is criticizing the uniformity of the four-story brick buildings of Memphis and even the idea of city itself. Faulkner could be saying that, in the South at least, the city has too many of the qualities of a "country town" or of the rural South that make it de-centered and ugly. In contrast, the traditional smaller town, centralized and looked to by citizens with a pride that translates into architectural elegance, becomes the appropriate means of settlement.

What rises above this banal uniform urban milieu attributed to Memphis, and what emerges as a physical, architectural presence in Faulkner's works, and especially in *The Reivers*, are

the houses of prostitution in Memphis's tenderloin district and the more reputable Memphis hotels. This is a view of Memphis that is not recorded in the city's written history (only incidental references to prostitution are made in the city's histories), nor is it a view that was promoted by civic leaders. Houses of prostitution essentially provide only a mental rather than a physical center to the city (at least for the residence of the hinterlands that indulge in the pleasures provided); they do not give the city a discrete sense of place. These houses, due to the necessity of presenting themselves anonymously, do not provide an architectural signifier of place.

The hotels of Memphis also play a significant role in Faulkner's treatment of the city, as evidenced by Faulkner's characterization that Mississippi begins in the lobby of a Memphis hotel. The dichotomy of houses of prostitution and houses of lodging being the only two signifiers of place to Faulkner and his characters could be a result of their rural point of view and their lack of a daily acquaintance with the city. When one looks at the larger buildings in existence of Memphis in 1905, however, the hotels—the Gayoso, the Peabody, the Chisca, the Arlington, and Gaston's—stand out as making up nearly all of the important buildings. (Fig. 9)



Figure 9. Gayoso House, 1910. One of the numerous large hotels in turn-of-the-century Memphis.

In Faulkner's work, the Southern city—almost exclusively Memphis and New Orleans—is a place of escape and license. Gerald Capers notes what he calls the “antebellum catholicity of taste”⁴⁰ that characterized Memphis well into the Progressive Era of the 1910s. He suggests that this led even “good church members” to believe that it was reasonable for male youths to visit houses of prostitution. In Faulkner's works, the red-light district functions as a major draw for the rural poor (as well as some more wealthy characters, though most of the wealthy went to New Orleans). *Sanctuary*, Faulkner's first work to use Memphis as a setting, introduced Miss Reba's house of prostitution as the

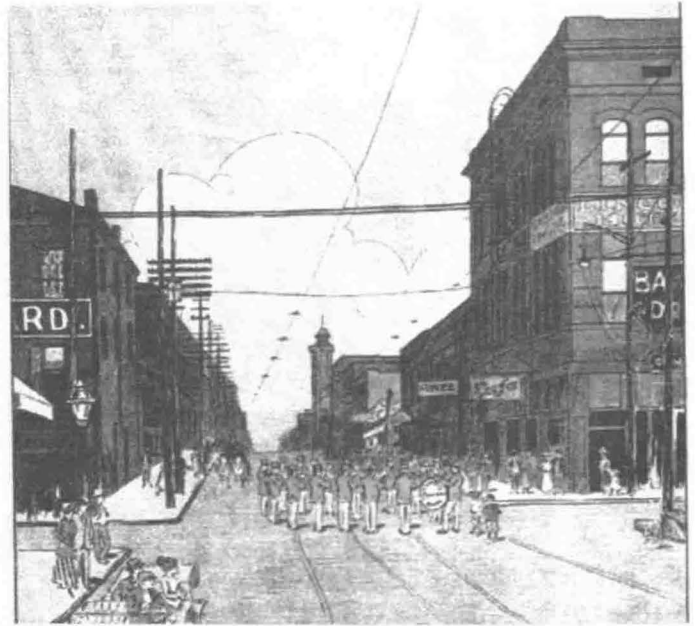


Figure 10. Beale Street. The second sign on the right side of the street is the famous P Wee's Saloon, 1917.



Figure 11. The second Lafayette County Courthouse at Oxford, Mississippi, 2004.

setting for a large portion of the novel. Miss Reba's also plays a role (some more significantly than others) in *Requiem for a Nun*, *The Town*, *The Mansion*, several short stories, and is the central setting in *The Reivers*. Only Miss Reba's bordello is described on the interior in Faulkner's works. In *Sanctuary*, it is described as a “dingy three-story [house], the entrance of which was hidden by a dingy lattice cubicle leaning a little awry.”⁴² For Faulkner's characters the Memphis Tenderloin is the center of Memphis. In most trips to Memphis in his novels, the first place that is visited, after arriving at the train or bus depot, is Gayoso Street. It is always the first place that is thought of when characters are planning to go to Memphis. Even the character Mink, in *The Mansion*, though he is on a mission and has only limited means to buy a gun to kill his cousin, is tempted to visit the red-light district; he remembers fondly his last trip to Memphis before he was sent to prison forty-four years prior.

The actual Memphis of 1905 had, as Faulkner depicts, many houses of prostitution as well as an enormous number of saloons. (Fig. 10) The city boasted over 500 saloons in 1903⁴³ (this number includes grocery stores because most had a barrel of whiskey in the back with cups for sale at ten cents per cup).⁴³ The situation was seen by some in the religious establishment as being out of control. A very successful evangelist who consistently packed the auditorium on Main and Linden Streets at the turn of the century said of Memphis that "if whiskey ran ankle deep in Memphis, and each front door had a dipper tied to it, you could not get drunk quicker than you can in Memphis now."⁴³ An editorial in Memphis's mostly widely circulated newspaper, *The Commercial Appeal*, said that "dives have been flourishing as they have never flourished before. Hundreds of lewd women ... have been imported. Street-walkers have been as thick as wasps in summer time."⁴⁵ The center of prostitution in Memphis was Gayoso Street.⁴⁶ The extent of the Tenderloin was rather small. The area was contained by Main Street on the west, Linden on the north, Mulberry on the east, and Beale on the south.⁴⁷ Surrounding this area was the tenement district (eighty-three percent of Memphians rented)⁴⁸ that housed many of the rural immigrants.

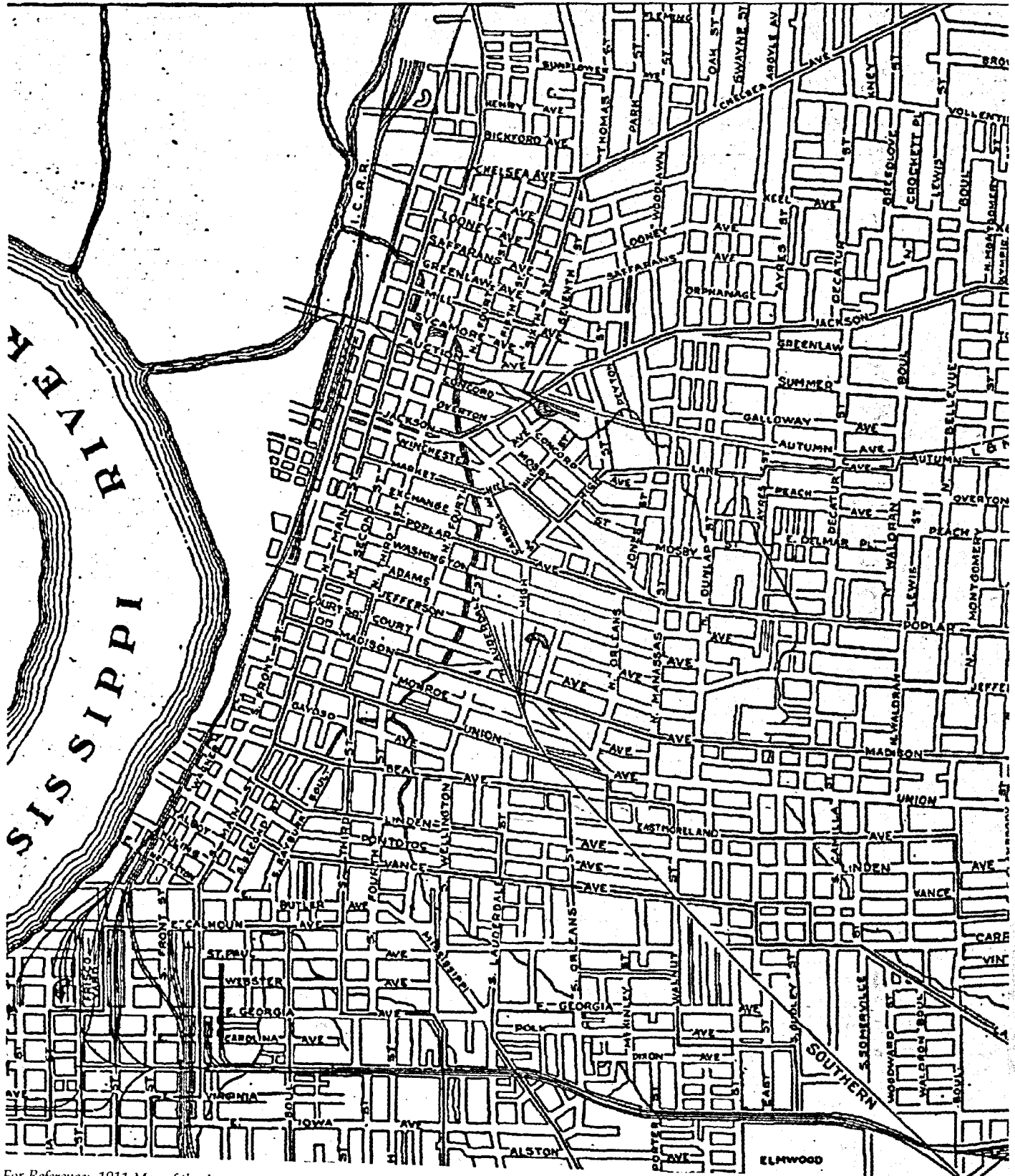
The red-light district, with its close proximity to the tenement district filled with new rural citizens, and the perception for many residents of Yoknapatawpha County of it being the center of Memphis, is in dramatic contrast to Jefferson both in behavior and in architectural form. Rural visitors and new immigrants were free in Memphis to act as they wished. The architecture of the district, as well as the Memphis city plan, aided this freedom. The tight streets, the uniform brick building material, and the scarce windows that are described in most accounts of the district, provide anonymity as well as freedom from the gaze of authority and the community/neighborhood as a whole. Its

uniformity and crowded buildings position this district of Memphis as parallel to the hyper-Modernity of the 1950s. The lack of oversight by an authority figure played a key role in the failure of the Pruitt-Igoe complex in St. Louis, whose destruction heralded the fading of Modernism. This same uniformity and lack of gaze parallels Memphis's pre-Modern urban fabric. (Fig. 5) This contrasts to the square at Jefferson where a structure of power is given architectural expression. This square, being described as stage-like, provides no anonymity, especially since most of the citizens of Jefferson know one another. This controlling gaze intensifies Jason's rage, in *The Sound and the Fury*, that is directed at Luster for taking Benjy to the square. Jason, always concerned with the family name, does not want Jefferson to see his idiot brother bellow.⁴⁹ The gaze can, therefore, hinder people's actions. Conversely, the lack of a gaze in Memphis's red-light district frees people to do certain activities that would not even be considered in Jefferson.

In Faulkner's writing, the urban South—Memphis and New Orleans—is defined by what Jefferson is or is not. The uniformity and banality of Memphis's built environment is contrasted to the visually complex and varied and historically rich central district of Jefferson. The freedom the characters exhibit in Memphis is a result of their being out of the controlling gaze of Jefferson's central square. Even the decision or inevitability of Memphis being the destination for the two characters of *The Reivers* is a result of Memphis being what Jefferson is not: a means of momentary escape from the slow rural South. In Faulkner's works, however, Memphis is always and only an escape, an ephemeral place of brothels and streetcars. Jefferson stands, immutable, as the destination of return, the lasting presence in Faulkner's South, with the "clock on the courthouse above the trees around the Square."⁵⁰ (Fig. 11)

Figure 12. Beale Street today





For Reference: 1911 Map of the downtown area of Memphis.

Endnotes:

- ¹ William Faulkner, *Essays, Speeches, and Public Letters* (New York: Random House, 1965), 11.
- ² David L. Cohn, *God Shakes Creation* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935), 17.
- ³ William Faulkner, *Novels 1957-1962, The Town, The Mansion, The Reivers* (New York: Library of America, 1999), 771.
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- ⁹ Faulkner, *Novels 1957-1962*, 1004.
- ¹⁰ Capers, *River Town*, 215.
- ¹¹ Faulkner, *Novels, 1957-62*, 771.
- ¹² William Faulkner, *Novels 1942-54, Go Down, Moses, Intruder in the Dust, Requiem for a Nun, A Fable* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 400.
- ¹³ Faulkner, *Novels 1957-62, 800-801*.
- ¹⁴ William Faulkner, *Collected Stories of William Faulkner*, (New York: Vintage International, 1995), 93.
- ¹⁵ Sigafos, *Cotton Row*, 103.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 224.
- ¹⁸ Miller, *Memphis During the Progressive Era, 1900-1917*, (Memphis: The Memphis State University Press, 1957), 7.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ²⁰ Capers, *River Town*, 226.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 206.
- ²² Kathleen C. Berkeley, *Like a Plague of Locusts: From an Antebellum Town to a New South City, Memphis, Tennessee, 1850-1880*, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1991), 13.
- ²³ Marc Auge, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, (New York: Verso, 1995), 77-78.
- ²⁴ William Faulkner, *Novels 1942-1954*, 400.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 616
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 499.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 499-500.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 320.
- ²⁹ William Faulkner, *Novels 1957-62*, 839-840.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 802.
- ³¹ Faulkner, *Collected Stories*, 97.
- ³² William Faulkner, *Sanctuary*, (New York: Modern Library, 1931), 169.
- ³³ J. Horace McFarland, "Eyesores that Spoil Memphis," *Ladies Home Journal*, June 1906, 23-29.
- ³⁴ Miller, *Progressive Era*, 15.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 16. Quoted in the *Commercial Appeal* June 14, 1906.
- ³⁷ Sigafos, *Cotton Row*, 112.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

³⁹ William Faulkner, *Uncollected Stories of William Faulkner*, (New York, Vintage International, 1997), 529.

⁴⁰ Capers, *River Town*, 232.

⁴¹ Faulkner, *Sanctuary*, 170.

⁴² Miller, *Progressive Era*, 88.

⁴³ Helen M. Coppock and Charles W. Crawford., ed. *Paul R. Coppock's Midsouth*, (Memphis: West Tennessee Historical Society, 1985), 80.

⁴⁴ Young, *Standard History*, 236.

⁴⁵ Miller, *Progressive Era*, 90.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁴⁸ Sigafos, *Cotton Row*, 103.

⁴⁹ William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, (New York: Random House, 1929), 400.

⁵⁰ Faulkner, *Novels 1957-1962*, 966. This is part of the long awaited return of the "reivers" home. The account, in full, reads: "About six the next afternoon we came over the last hill, and there was the clock on the courthouse above the trees around the square. Ned said, "Hee hee hee." He was in front with Boon. He said: "Seems like I been gone two years."

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Editor's comment:

This paper won the Pella Writing Prize for 2005--a prize awarded for the best undergraduate writing done by an architecture student.