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# Ill-Fame on Blackberry Alley: Prostitution and Sport in 19th-Century Philadelphia

## **Abstract**

The 19th century offers a view of prostitution in a time of its open celebration. A remarkably permissive attitude towards sex work defies conventional understandings of “Victorian prudery” and makes for a fascinating period of American sexual history. Though the 20th century history of prostitution is defined by efforts to regulate the practice on moral grounds, the 19th century allows an assessment of the bawdy life through the eye of the market. In the mid 19th-century, the era of established brothels as social spaces, the urban leisure and sex trade was found objectionable only as noise disturbances. This project conducts a spatial analysis of the 19th century leisure economy via a public guide, in contrast to the 20th-century post-reform accounts of prostitution in arrest records or city Vice Commission reports.

## **Keywords**

Philadelphia

## **Disciplines**

United States History

## **Comments**

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### Ill-Fame on Blackberry Alley: Prostitution and Sport in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Philadelphia.

Thomson Korostoff

2015–2016 Penn Humanities Forum Undergraduate Research Fellow  
University of Pennsylvania

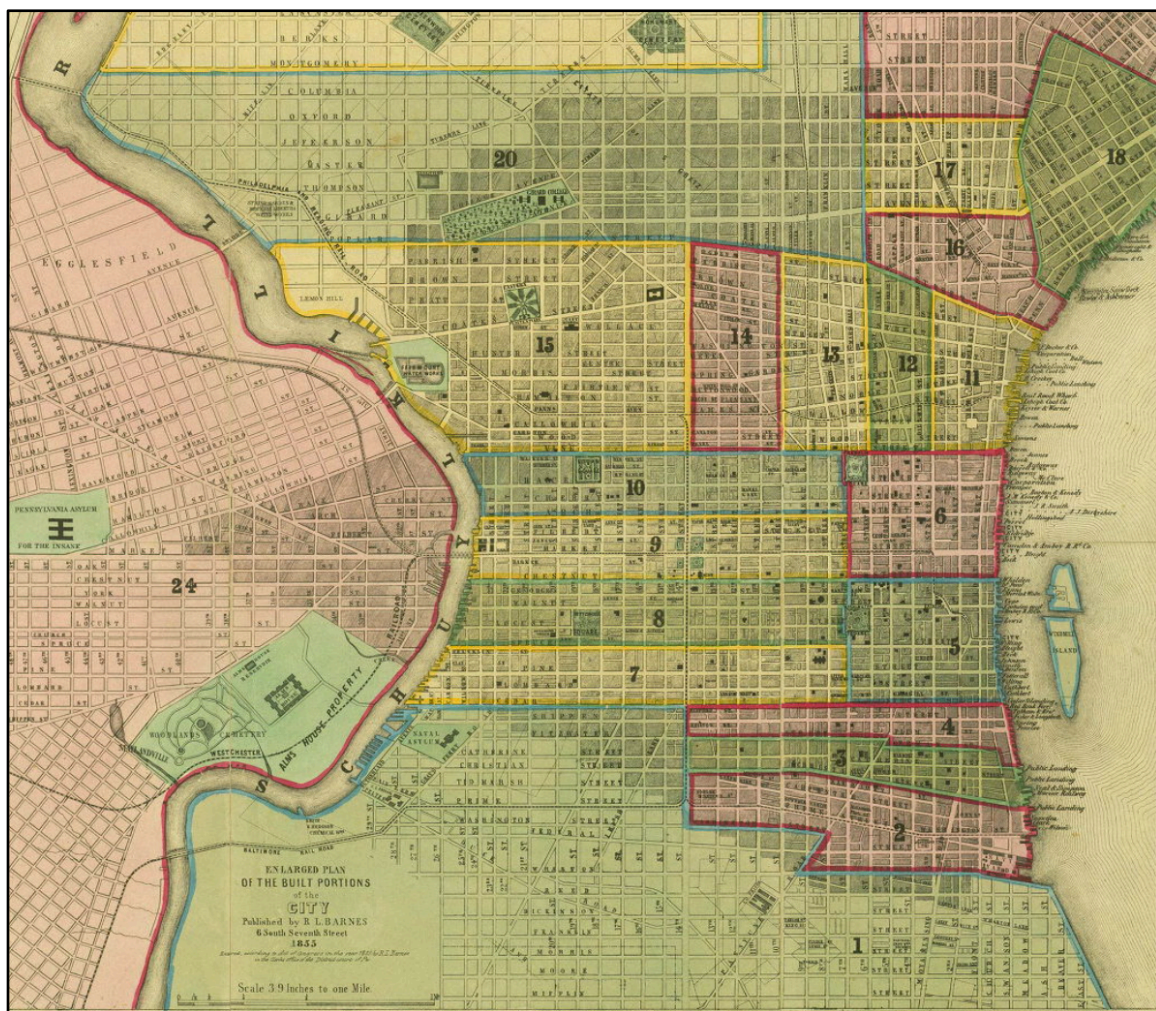


Figure 1: Philadelphia, 1855. Source: *New Map of the Consolidated City of Philadelphia, 1855*, Philadelphia: R.L. Barnes, 1855, Free Library of Philadelphia.

## Introduction

Philadelphia in 1855 is burgeoning. Railroads are beginning to connect the nation, many locomotives manufactured in the Baldwin factory in Philadelphia. The city's growing population prompts the consolidation in 1854 of the present city-county, celebrated here in an 1855 map (Figure 1, title page). This is no longer the Quaker city clustered around the Meeting House at Second and Market Streets. Philadelphia's center is promenading west along Chestnut Street; Washington Square has gone from burial ground to fashionable residence. A block west of the square, bisecting the block between 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Streets from Walnut to Spruce, Blackberry Alley seems to be an axis of religious and historical prestige (Figure 2). The two-block street stretches north from the Pennsylvania Hospital, the first in the United States; also holding the city's first and most prominent first Jewish cemetery, Mikveh Israel; a Quaker meetinghouse; the Music Fund Hall, which would be the site of the 1856 Republican National Convention; and an Episcopal church.<sup>1</sup> Somewhat surprisingly, the *Philadelphia North American* characterized Blackberry Alley in 1855 as having "long been held by the community as a cent[er] of moral pestilence."<sup>2</sup> While a paragon of civic virtue in the daytime, Blackberry Alley and the streets around it turned at night into a den of vice.

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Goldsmith, "Mikveh Israel Cemetery," *Philaplace*, accessed March 02, 2016,

<sup>2</sup> "Progress of the Moral War in Philadelphia," *Philadelphia North American* (Philadelphia), republished in *The New York Times* (New York), Sep. 5, 1854.

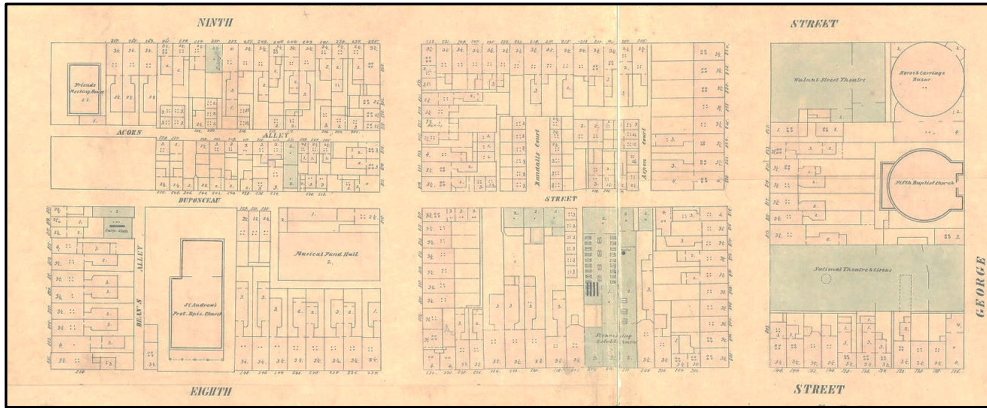


Figure 2: Blackberry Alley (Duponceau Street), 1860. Source: *Insurance Maps of the City of Philadelphia, PA*, Ernest Hexamer and William Locher. Philadelphia: Hexamer and Lochler, 1860, Free Library of Philadelphia

## Historical Background

The prominence of prostitution in 1850's Philadelphia is confusing when viewed through the moral climate of the years that followed. Common conceptions of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century city are shaped by the perspectives of the Progressive era at the end of the century, which ushered in sweeping sanitary, aesthetic, and moral urban reforms. The city in the 1850's shows the gradual building of this desire for reform, as well as conditions before reforms came to be enacted.

Another reason to study mid-19<sup>th</sup> century prostitution is the information at hand. Other studies of the spatial distribution of prostitution focus on arrests, either at brothels or of streetwalkers, which fail to demonstrate the presence of prostitution so much as police responses.<sup>3</sup> This is history written by the victors of what the North American called the "moral war" of reform, one in progress in 1849 but not victorious until the national campaigns that culminated with Prohibition in 1920.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Bertozzi, "Vicious Geography: The Spatial Organization of Prostitution in Twentieth Century Philadelphia," Undergraduate Thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 2005; Stanford Spatial History Project, "Mapping Vice in Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Philadelphia," <http://web.stanford.edu/group/spatialhistory/cgi-bin/site/project.php?id=1017>

<sup>4</sup> "Progress of the Moral War in Philadelphia."

This work avoids that investigative course for two reasons: first, to study sex work in the antebellum city as it was practiced, not persecuted, provides a more comprehensive appreciation of the phenomena of urban life in that time period. Secondly, and more methodologically important, is the fact that arrest records in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century are a far more limited source than those of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Prostitution in the 1840s and 50s was, by and large, legal, or at least only episodically controlled.<sup>5</sup> The moral sanctions against sex for sale were not part of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century climate. Men were willing to openly admit to using prostitutes. This is evidenced when respectable patrons charged brothels or sex workers with stealing from them—something countered by a number of cases in which madams successfully sued customers for damages against the house for furniture broken by brawls.<sup>6</sup> Though there was a moral backlash against the practice, the prevalence and popularity of the urban male culture of “sporting males” or “fancy men”, young single men out in the city led to blatant and enthusiastic discussion and advertising in public space.<sup>7</sup>

Prostitution was an accepted practice for men across the class spectrum, but some internal divisions were visible: dandies on one hand, who either were, or aspired in dress, to be upper class; and the gaudy working-class cultural unit of the so-called “Bowery b’hoys,” known in popular discourse as “fancy men for the lower ten thousand.”<sup>8</sup> Figures

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<sup>5</sup> Timothy Gilfoyle *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920*, New York: Norton, 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 108; Marcia Carlisle, “Disorderly City, Disorderly Women: Prostitution in Ante-Bellum Philadelphia,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 110, no. 4, (October 1, 1986): 549-568.

<sup>7</sup> Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 99-107.

<sup>8</sup> Ned Buntline, quoted in Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 104.

such as these loomed immense in the public consciousness of the time, visible in urban print material.<sup>9</sup>

### Stranger's Guides

One such object of this publicity, demonstrating the prevalence of brothels, and the conflict of celebration and moralizing that surrounded them, is the 19<sup>th</sup> century sporting man's guidebook. A surviving Philadelphia example: "A Guide to the Stranger, or Pocket Companion for the Fancy, Containing a List of the Gay Houses and Ladies of Pleasure in the City of Brotherly Love and Sisterly Affection" could be obtained in hotel lobbies and contains locations and descriptions of the city brothels, those to visit and those to avoid.<sup>10</sup> Such guides were available in other cities, sometimes under more subtle titles, such as the 1870 New York "Gentleman's Companion" which offered the curious traveller "insight into the character and doings of people whose doings are carefully screened from public view."<sup>11</sup>

The guide approaches prostitution with tangible enthusiasm. While these guides appreciate dangers, those at hand are the loss of reputation—not for visiting a brothel, but for visiting the *wrong* one: the guide takes its purpose "to warn the stranger and gay city bucks against the possibility of being involuntarily induced to visit a low pest house."<sup>12</sup> The guide enables a man "to shun those low dens of infamy and disease with which this

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<sup>9</sup> Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 110-114.

<sup>10</sup> *A Guide to the Stranger, or Pocket Companion for the Fancy*, Philadelphia, 1849, Library Company of Philadelphia; Library Company of Philadelphia, "Selling Sex," *Capitalism by Gaslight*, 2012, <http://www.librarycompany.org/shadoweconomy/index.htm>. For title page of the Guide, see Appendix 1.

<sup>11</sup> *The Gentleman's Companion*, New York, 1870, The New York Historical Society.

<sup>12</sup> *A Guide to the Stranger*, 8.

city abounds” and steer himself instead to a “Paradise of Love” or a “Temple of Venus.”<sup>13</sup>

These guidebooks have been tempting to historians as emblems of a freer sexuality and have been used to re-characterize the supposed sexual repression of the Victorian era.<sup>14</sup> It is necessary, though, to view the climate that created this allowance, without historicizing—to see the acceptance of the sporting male as a dangerous glorification of male sexuality, one that maintained dehumanizing and exploitative power imbalances between customers and sex workers. Though this research cites some of the legal benefits working women enjoyed under legalized prostitution, it does not minimize the very real hardships they endured.

In its language about race, the guide makes clear its horror at inter-racial relations. In the case of non-white prostitutes, the guide is pointed but not so alarmed: “We have no objection to a white man hugging a negro wench to his bosom, providing his stomach is strong enough to relish the infliction.”<sup>15</sup>

When it comes to the suggestion of non-white customers, the tone becomes completely distraught: Sal Boyer, “it is said, has had connection with the lowest negro, for the small remuneration of potatoes and flour to support her borders!”<sup>16</sup> This is the only entry not to contain a location—the other houses flagged to avoid still have addresses—but is perhaps not a real house at all, and the writer’s attempt to insert comment on the intersection of racial and sexual boundaries. Though some of the houses in the Guide are located around the areas with high African-American populations at the

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<sup>13</sup> *A Guide to the Stranger*, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Phillip Howell, “Sex and the City of Bachelors: Sporting Guidebooks and Urban Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Britain and America,” *Cultural Geographies* 8, no. 1 (January 2001): 20-50.

<sup>15</sup> *A Guide to the Stranger*, 17.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 14.



time, most are not specified as having African-American workers—unlike the 20<sup>th</sup> century geography of sex work, where streetwalkers corridors become particularly associated with the race of the neighborhood in which they are located.<sup>17</sup>

The primary social factor that shapes these guidebooks is that of social class. One of the more common 19<sup>th</sup> century arguments made to justify prostitution is license granted to an apparently uncontrollable male sexuality—prostitution was presumed to protect the virtue of middle-class and upper-class women by diverting the outsized sexual energy of their male social equals.<sup>18</sup> This guide subverts that idea by including houses of assignation for upper class women: a house “very comfortable for the accommodation of married ladies, sly misses, and their lovers” or a “great resort for married ladies.”<sup>19</sup> Though attempts at categorizing various establishments quickly become muddled, but these listings are explicitly places for married women to meet with lovers. Equating men and women as customers, the guide is most insistent on the quality of various houses, determined in large part by their public reputation.

Attempts at class distinction arise in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century city more quickly than urban form and segregation can shift to separate them.<sup>20</sup> This results in a socially heterogeneous city that attempts to define and reflect social classes without spatially separating them.

This mixed city, however, has some distinctive spatial features.

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<sup>17</sup> Bertozzi, “Vicious Geography”; Stanford Spatial History Project, “Mapping Vice.” See Appendix 2 for a map of African-American distribution in Philadelphia, 1847.

<sup>18</sup> Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 102-106.

<sup>19</sup> *A Guide to the Stranger*, 11; Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 163-171.

<sup>20</sup> Sam Bass Warner, *The Private City; Philadelphia in Three Periods of Its Growth*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968; Stuart Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

## Citywide Patterns

The abundance of religious buildings around Blackberry Alley is only half the story of the street's location in the city. At the north end of the block stood the Walnut Street and National theatres.<sup>21</sup> The theatre was one of the centers of the sporting male culture. The other center of this culture was the brothel, and the shared patronage led to the consistent location of brothels around theatres.<sup>22</sup> By the 1840s most major theatres, even those with the most bourgeois patronage, had a distant gallery or infamous "third tier" specifically set aside for prostitutes that would come in from nearby houses.<sup>23</sup> The spatial clustering of brothels near theatres was not only for the movement of the shared patrons of both establishments, but because the women also went out in order to solicit customers. The other spatial feature that determined the location of brothels were parks and major streets, where streetwalkers would stroll searching for customers.<sup>24</sup>

This use of the theatre as a venue both of high culture and more base entertainment highlights the heterogeneity that characterized urban life in this period: brothels clustered near theatres, and often on smaller alleyways, but were not confined to any one part of the city. A map of the locations of brothels mentioned in the Guide, shows sex work more scattered than the vice districts that characterize sex work by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Figure 3).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Insurance Maps of Philadelphia*, Hexamer and Locher, 1860.

<sup>22</sup> Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 109-112, Claudia Johnson, "That Guilty Third Tier: Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century American Theaters," *American Quarterly* 27, no. 5, Special Issue: Victorian Culture in America (Dec. 1975): 575-584.

<sup>23</sup> Johnson, "That Guilty Third Tier," 575-578. For digital renderings of the Chestnut Street Theatre Interior, which show the third Tier, see Jack Wolcott, "The Chestnut Street Theatre Reconstructed," *The Chestnut Street Theatre Project*, March 10 2004, <http://www.videoccasions-nw.com/history/cst/cstnuopn.htm>

<sup>24</sup> Carlisle, "Disorderly City," 557.

<sup>25</sup> Stanford Spatial History Project, "Mapping Vice."

Mapping the location of some, though not neatly all, of the city's theatres, as well as parks (where streetwalkers were also particularly known to look for customers in the evening) begins to explain some of the patterns of brothels and shows the clustering of the two institutions. (Figure 4). Not all the theatres existed at the same time—the 11<sup>th</sup> Street Opera opened in 1855, and the Chestnut Street Theatre burned the following year—a very common end for theatres.<sup>26</sup> The Arch Street Theatre (Arch and 6<sup>th</sup> Streets) had as a member of its company an actor called J.B. Wilkes, also known by his real name of John Wilkes Booth.<sup>27</sup>

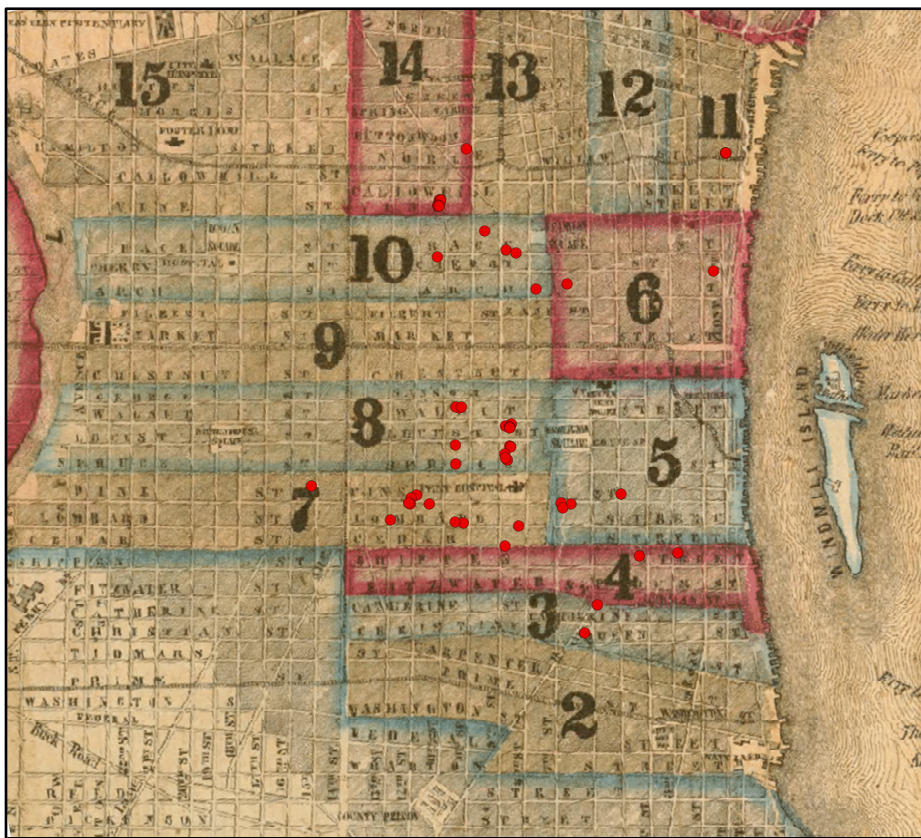


Figure 3: Distribution of brothels in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Philadelphia, marked by red dots. Basemap: *New Map of the Consolidated City of Philadelphia, 1855*, R.L.Barnes.

<sup>26</sup> “Eleventh Street Opera House,” *Free Library of Philadelphia*, accessed March 11 2016; “Melodeon Theatre,” *Philadelphia Architects and Buildings*, accessed March 09 2016 [https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/pj\\_display.cfm/6239](https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/pj_display.cfm/6239); John Wolcott, “Philadelphia’s Chestnut Street Theatre: A Plan and Elevation,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 30, no. 3 (Oct. 1971): 209–18.

<sup>27</sup> Cary H, “John Wilkes Booth Slept Here,” *Fondly, Pennsylvania*, last updated April 21, 2011, <https://processandpreserve.wordpress.com/2011/04/21/john-wilkes-booth-slept-here/>

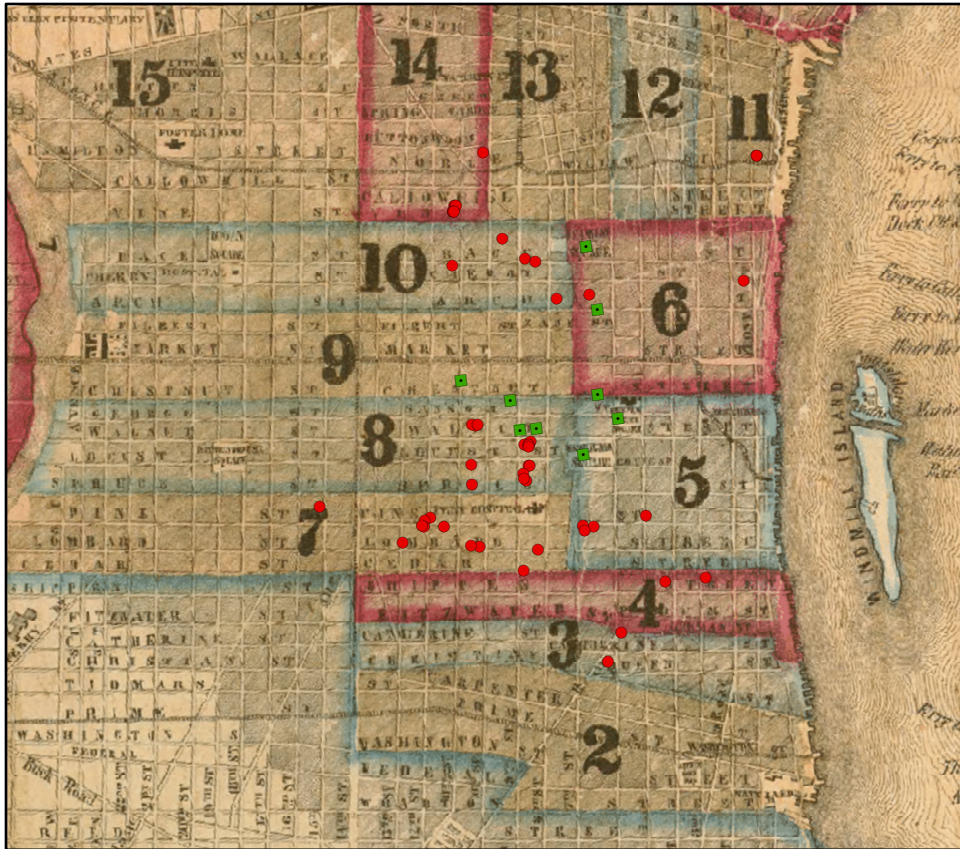


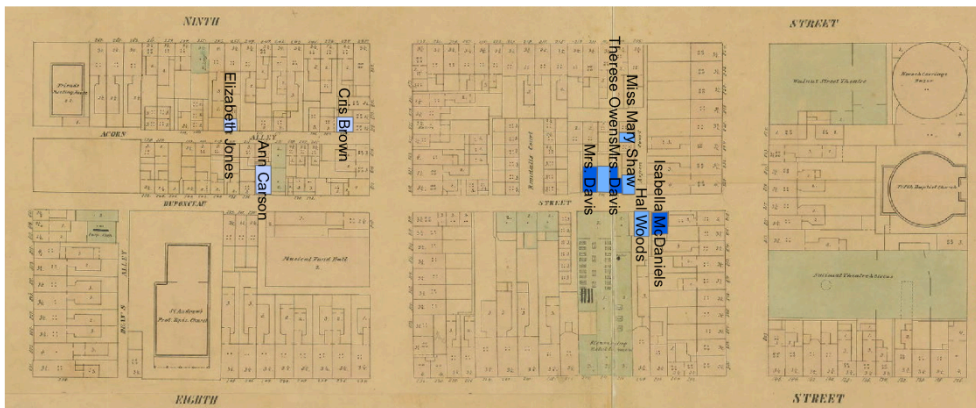
Figure 4: With the locations of theatres and parks in green.

The rankings of brothels in the guidebook demonstrate some of the class disparities. Figure 5 shows the city's brothels coded by the assessments given in the *Guide to the Stranger*: the first class houses, the “Paradises of Love;” second-class establishments; third class; those with direct warnings to avoid, and entire streets or neighborhoods clustered with third-rate houses. To focus on Blackberry alley, (Figure 6), it becomes evident that brothels of all different grades operated within the same blocks—though certain elements of urban entertainment cluster in places, they are not separated there by class. This is embodied nowhere more than the theatre itself, with its varying human entertainments for a wide spectrum of patrons.



Figure 5: Brothels in Philadelphia mapped by the grades assigned in the *Guide*, “Districts” being areas where the *Guide* locates clusters of brothels without naming them (unrelated to the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century pattern of vice districts.)

- Grades**
- - "First-Class"
  - "Second-Class"
  - "Third-Class"
  - Dangerous
  - Districts



- Brothels, 1849**
- "First-Class"
  - "Second-Class"
  - "Third-Class"

Figure 6: Brothels on Blackberry Alley, according to the grades in the *Guide*.

The limited regulation in the period takes the form of an 1855 raid of nine houses in the streets around Blackberry Alley (Figure 7). The article detailing this, from the Philadelphia North American (later the Public Ledger) gives an account of the 16 men and 38 women taken across Washington Square to the city Marshal. It shows again the variety of patrons found on Blackberry Alley establishments:

“Of the men arrested, one was a newly appointed police officer of the eighth ward, one a circus performer of world-wide reputation, two gentlemen of the theatrical profession, one a Western merchant, one a market-street clerk, who had set out the show the merchant the elephant, and found that he had yet something to learn of the animal himself, two Jersey men, whose produce was in the wagons in Market-street, and several gentlemen of the fancy, with rakish hats, massive gold chains, and any number of finger rings. Their ages varied from 20 to 50.”<sup>28</sup>

Though discussed as a process of a moral war in Philadelphia, the North American acknowledges that excessive noise was the primary reason for the arrests.

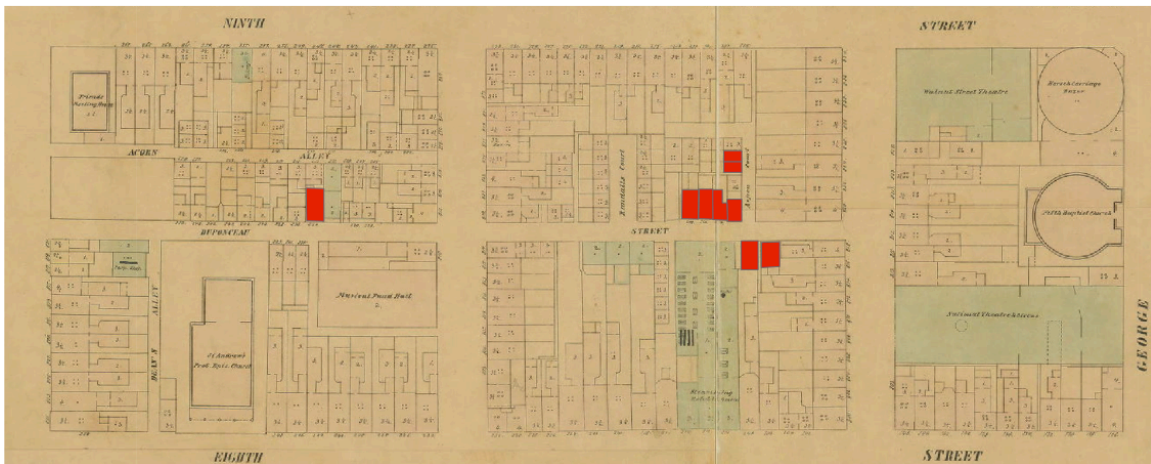


Figure 7: Arrests on Blackberry Alley, 1855, in red.

## Conclusions

Blackberry Alley shows the heterogeneous, unregulated 19<sup>th</sup> century pre-reform city, the mingling of classes in an intimate urban space. This is a form of urbanism that was so completely destroyed by the specialization of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century urban reforms—simple expansion, zoning, specialization, moral reform on prostitution and theatres and even the sale of alcohol. The midcentury city was not without its own tensions—but it confronted them in smaller spaces. The history of everyday people, of prostitution as a common employment and entertainment—seen in its own documents,

<sup>28</sup> “Progress of the Moral War in Philadelphia.

uncompromised by the changes to follow—provides glimpse into to this vanished spatial order.

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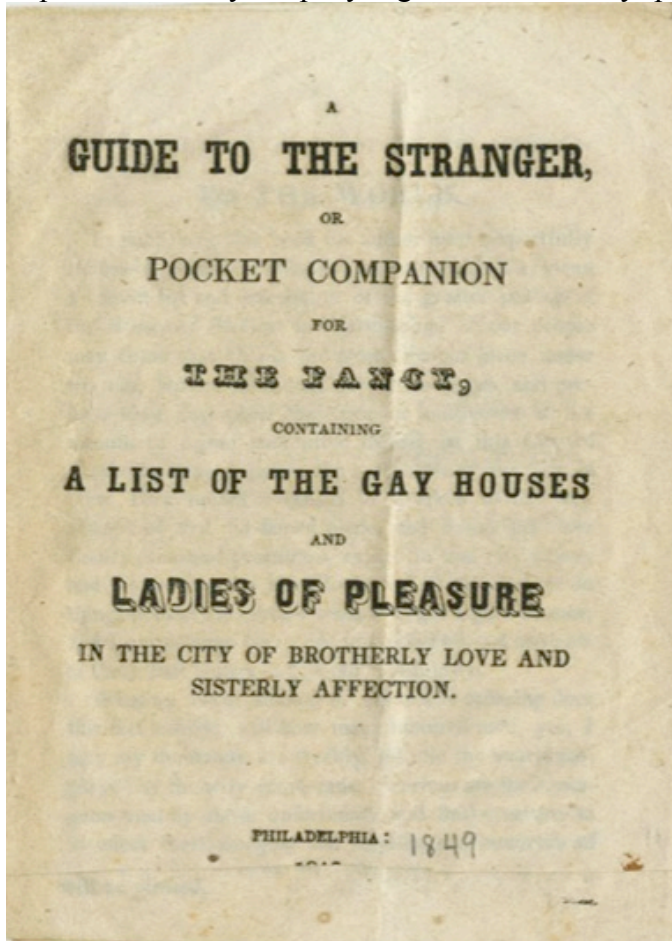
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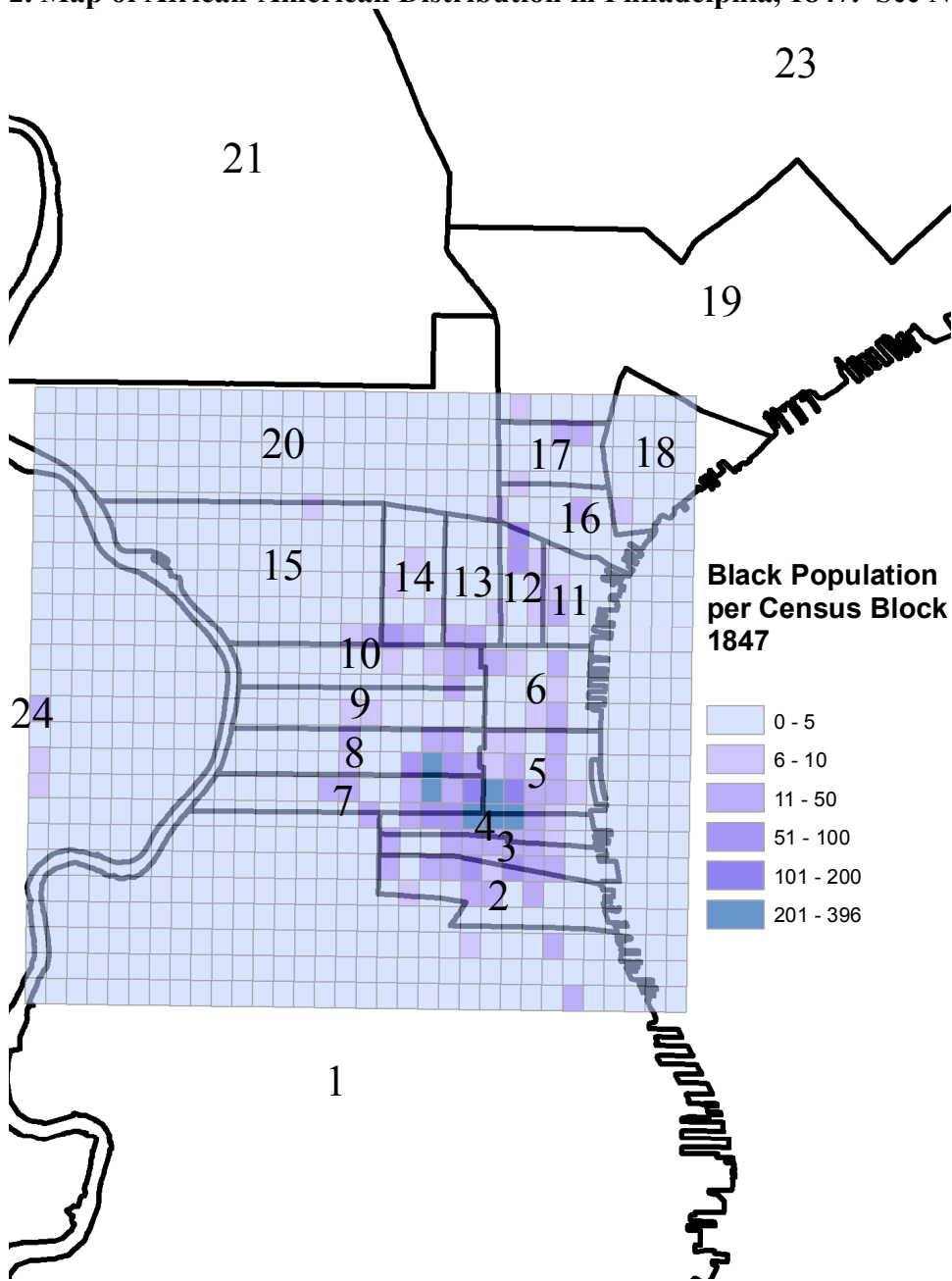
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**Appendices**

**Appendix 1: Cover Page, *A Guide to the Stranger*.** See Note 10. For the entire *Guide* from the Library Company of Philadelphia, see <http://www.librarycompany.org/shadoweconomy/ipad/stranger/index.htm>



**2. Map of African-American Distribution in Philadelphia, 1847.** See Note 17.



This map was generated using the tabulated version of the Abolition Society Census of 1847 from the Philadelphia Social History Project. See Theodore Hershberg, Philadelphia Social History Project: Pennsylvania Abolition Society Census Schedule, 1847. ICPSR03805-v1. (Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2009-02-26). <http://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR03805.v1>