



5-2007

Public Women in Public Spaces: Prostitution and Union Military Experience, 1861-1865

Danielle Jeannine Cole
University of Tennessee - Knoxville

Follow this and additional works at: https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_gradthes



Part of the [History of Gender Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cole, Danielle Jeannine, "Public Women in Public Spaces: Prostitution and Union Military Experience, 1861-1865." Master's Thesis, University of Tennessee, 2007.
https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_gradthes/273

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact trace@utk.edu.

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Danielle Jeannine Cole entitled "Public Women in Public Spaces: Prostitution and Union Military Experience, 1861-1865." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in History.

Stephen V. Ash, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Lynn Sacco, Daniel Feller

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Danielle Jeannine Cole entitled "Public Women in Public Spaces: Prostitution and Union Military Experience, 1861-1865." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in History.

Stephen V. Ash

Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Lynn Sacco

Daniel Feller

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate
School

**Public Women in Public Spaces:
Prostitution and Union Military Experience, 1861-1865**

A Thesis Presented for
the Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Danielle Jeannine Cole
May 2007

Copyright © 2007 by Danielle Jeannine Cole
All rights reserved.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Dr. Stephen V. Ash, whose knowledge and guidance has greatly inspired this thesis. Thanks also to Dr. Lynn Sacco, whose questions and suggestions have pushed my scholarship in new directions, and Dr. Daniel Feller, for being on my committee. Without the academic and emotional support from my family, Neil Cole, Barbara Cole, Michele Cole, and H el ene Cole, this project would not have been possible.

ABSTRACT

This study examines prostitution in Union-occupied cities during the American Civil War. During the war, the visibility of urban prostitution triggered contentious public debates over appropriate forms of sexuality and over the position of sexualized women in public areas. Union commanders posted in occupied cities had an especially difficult time dealing with prostitution since their garrison troops had money, were not preoccupied by marching and fighting, and expected urban pleasures in an urban environment. For example, military authorities in Washington, D. C., Norfolk, Virginia, and New Orleans, Louisiana, unsuccessfully struggled to control or eliminate public prostitution using traditional legal systems.

The provost marshals of Nashville and Memphis, Tennessee met with more success when they began the first American experiment in legalized prostitution. The military hoped that regulation, which required sex workers to purchase licenses and pass medical exams, would curb the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Although both prostitutes and Union soldiers seem to have benefited from legalization, civilians vehemently and publicly proclaimed its negative effects on society. Despite the experiment's medical and financial success, civic authorities deregulated the sex trade once the war ended and the military governance ceased. In this thesis, based on contemporary newspapers, correspondence, and military records, I argue that this postwar deregulation was a reaction against the prostitutes' wartime encroachment on public space.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
CHAPTER I.....	1
“NOT A DEBUTANTE IN THIS INSTITUTION”: ANTEBELLUM AND EARLY WARTIME PROSTITUTION.....	1
CHAPTER II.....	8
“IT IS A PERFECT SODOM”: PROSTITUTION IN UNION-OCCUPIED CITIES, 1863-1865.....	8
CHAPTER III.....	12
“WOMEN AND WHISKEY ARE PLENTIFUL HERE”: LEGALIZING PROSTITUTION IN NASHVILLE AND MEMPHIS, 1863-1865.....	12
CHAPTER IV.....	23
“THE EXAMPLE OF THE OSTRICH”: PROSTITUTION IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE CIVIL WAR.....	23
LIST OF REFERENCES.....	27
VITA.....	34

CHAPTER I

“NOT A DEBUTANTE IN THIS INSTITUTION”: ANTEBELLUM AND EARLY WARTIME PROSTITUTION

Civil War historians have typically allowed prostitution to hide behind the thick cover of battlefield smoke and politics. The mobilization of hundreds of thousands of troops far from families' prying eyes and ready for excitement, combined with devastating economic conditions for civilian women, sparked an apparently enormous trade in prostitution. Camped just outside of Nashville, Tennessee, in 1863, Private Henry Schelling bragged to a friend, "There is four whorehouses here where a man can get a single jump for 3 dollars, five dollars [for] all night in Tennessee money. You may think I am a hard case, but I am as pious as you can find in the Army." Schelling may have exaggerated his virtues, but soldiers and civilians all noticed how prostitution flourished during the Civil War. As the war progressed, the visibility of urban prostitution triggered contentious public debates over appropriate forms of sexuality and over the position of sexualized women in public areas.¹

Whether or not prostitution actually increased during the war, prostitutes, commonly known as "public women," stepped out of the shadows and into the limelight of the public sphere. Before the war, most successful prostitutes operated on the fringe of public consciousness and seldom made spectacles of themselves in the respectable quarters. In return, most antebellum towns tolerated the sex trade with a wink and a bribe. Few wanted to upset this practical arrangement once the war erupted. Although Union military officials complained about the prevalence of venereal disease and female camp followers, the army did not see prostitution as a real problem until 1862, when Americans realized how long the war might drag on. Union commanders posted in occupied cities had an especially difficult time dealing with prostitution since their garrison troops had money, were not preoccupied by marching and fighting, and expected urban pleasures in an urban environment. For example, military authorities in Washington, D. C., Norfolk, Virginia, and New Orleans, Louisiana, unsuccessfully struggled to control or eliminate public prostitution using traditional legal systems.

The provost marshals of Nashville and Memphis, Tennessee met with more success when they began the first American experiment in legalized prostitution. The military hoped that regulation, which required sex workers to purchase licenses and pass medical exams, would curb the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Although both prostitutes and Union soldiers seem to have benefited from legalization, civilians vehemently and publicly proclaimed its negative effects on society. Despite the experiment's medical and financial success, civic authorities deregulated the sex trade once the war ended and the military governance ceased. In this thesis, based on contemporary newspapers, correspondence, and military records, I argue that this postwar deregulation was a reaction against the prostitutes' wartime encroachment on public space.²

The communities' growing awareness of prostitutes' incursions on the public sphere was evident during both Nashville's and Memphis's legalization process. Other commanders who tried to control prostitution without legalizing it struggled with a

similar dilemma. Middle-class Americans vainly tried to create an idealized world where the disreputable were separated from the reputable, but the messy complications of prostitution blurred such distinctions. Although physical boundaries and spaces are important signifiers, I define the public sphere as to include the social realm that exists in conversation and discourse. Obviously, this means that multiple conversations create multiple and frequently competing spheres. According to theorist Jurgen Habermas, the dominant culture's public sphere serves as a check on state power and is precariously dependent on socio-economic conditions. The working-class prostitutes and the emerging "respectable" middle-class occupied competing but peacefully coexisting public spheres before the war. I argue that prostitutes' profits from the soldiers' business and their increased visibility as they paraded through town arm-in-arm with Union officers allowed them access, however unconsciously, to the dominant middle-class culture's public sphere. As the prostitutes' economic power increased, so did their political potential. Historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has argued that the mere existence of sex workers threatened Victorian patriarchy because of female prostitutes' independence and their daily confrontations with often violent and depraved clients, the antithesis of masculine protectors. Especially if, as Habermas argues, the public sphere was patriarchal in character, prostitutes entering the public sphere threatened the middle class on multiple fronts.³

During the past thirty years, historians have increasingly examined the intersection of culture, politics, gender, and sexuality. George Rable, Drew Gilpin Faust, and LeeAnn Whites, among others, have written extensively on how the Civil War disrupted traditional gender roles and identity. Other scholars, such as Timothy Gilfoyle, John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, have used the Civil War as a marker to separate early and late nineteenth-century attitudes toward sexuality and prostitution. These historians have recognized the politicized nature of sexuality, especially as genteel whites began to voice fears about racial amalgamation in the decades leading up to the Civil War.⁴

Despite this body of work, historians have written little on wartime sexuality. Thomas Lowry, a medical scholar, has extensively researched Civil War prostitution and venereal disease, but his work often follows the tendency Ann Butler identifies as a "prurient tilt toward sensational erotica and moralistic judgments" that has helped limit historians' understanding of varying frameworks of sexuality. Catherine Clinton has done a better job of contextualizing prostitution, but her work concentrates on its linguistic and theoretical aspects instead of its reality. Union officials' attempts to control prostitution in occupied cities provide a revealing window into the nineteenth century by forcing sexuality as a marketable commodity into the public sphere and drawing many people who left no other records of their personal views into an open discourse on sexuality.⁵

Newspapers, personal correspondence, and military and other records show ample evidence of how the war stimulated sexual commerce. Prurient tourist guides were available in many wartime cities, such as Free Loveyer's Directory to the Seraglios in New York, Philadelphia, and all the Principal Cities in the Union, which described local brothels and their specialties. Even Union soldiers who occupied hostile cities such as Charleston and Memphis found many women willing to sell sex to the enemy. One northern paper sardonically noted that the Memphis Cyprians, often expensively and

tastefully dressed, were too “universal . . . to be bound by political creed or formulas.” Evidently, the soldiers were as well.⁶

Soldiers often used sexual exploits to assert their manhood. One private recalled “an old saying that no man could be a soldier unless he had gone through Smokey Row [an eight-block haven for prostitutes in Nashville]. . . . They said Smokey Row killed more soldiers than the war.” Union troops eager to prove their virility had ample opportunity. Despite the sectional tensions, prostitutes, masked balls, pornography, and strip teasing “model artist” shows were widely available to occupying soldiers.⁷

Anyone who could read the newspaper and participate in the major social debates was aware of the destructive ramifications of “open” sexuality. Alongside ads for ice cream, muslins, and baby portraits, almost every large newspaper ran front-page ads promising miracle cures for gonorrhea, syphilis, and other venereal diseases caused by the destructive “habits of inconsiderate youths and excessive indulgence of the passions.” Doctors would use the same advertisement space to market cures for “Sexular Diseases” and to promote respectable marriage guides such as “The Mountain of Light.” Dispensaries offered nostrums such as M. Le Velpan’s French Preventative Powders for use by “those who, from any cause, may deem it necessary to avoid conception.” Many wives feared legitimate pregnancy with its resultant health risks and added responsibilities, but the phrase “from any cause” suggests that apothecaries may have also been peddling it to a specific sex trade market. Children posed an additional problem for sex workers, especially street prostitutes and part-time prostitutes who barely made ends meet anyway. Court records and calcified infant remains in privy shafts testify to the frequency of infanticide when abortive powders failed.⁸

The realities and perceptions of antebellum prostitution informed many of the wartime genteel attitudes toward the increasingly public sex trade. In 1860, Nashville’s census taker recorded a unique look into the lives of approximately two hundred full-time sex workers, most of whom were literate Tennesseans. Unlike east coast cities, which often reported high rates of Irish prostitutes, only four of Nashville’s reported prostitutes were foreign-born. The largest brothel housed seventeen prostitutes, eight children, and three adult men, although most bawdy houses were much smaller. Jennie Rogers kept a typical brothel with three other women. Her house was situated next to a Methodist clergyman’s family and a tavern, which also housed four prostitutes and three adolescent boys. This arrangement was not unusual; many brothels housed boys with no specified profession and seemingly no relation to any of the women.⁹

Although men sometimes owned the buildings, women usually ran the bawdy houses. In many instances, mothers, daughters, and sisters prostituted themselves in the same brothel. In Nashville, for example, Jane Ross worked the sex trade with her sixteen-year-old daughter two doors down from a policeman and down the street from a Presbyterian clergyman. Girls born to poor prostitutes had few chances to escape their mother’s fate, especially since sex workers often began initiating their children into the bawdy culture at a very young age. Shortly before the war, one prostitute told a reformer that she had realized early in life that “when a whole day’s work brings only a few pennies, a smile will buy me a dinner.” More than a smile could pay for lodging, clothing, and even luxuries. Reporters seldom seemed surprised to find family-run brothels, perhaps because they assumed that such immorality was hereditary. When a

Memphis paper noted the arrest of a mother who ran a bagnio with her two daughters, the reporter emphasized the character flaws of such women and not the conditions in which they had been raised. The assumption of moral degeneracy instead of allowing for social and economic pressures influenced how many people viewed prostitutes as they became increasingly more visible during the war.¹⁰

Brothels did not monopolize the antebellum sex profession, and prostitutes often worked independently. Francis Shetton, a young prostitute from Tennessee, lived with an illiterate Irish shoemaker twice her age. Despite her youth, her personal wealth was more than triple what the shoemaker owned. Sarah Hughes, a forty-two-year-old married sex worker, lived with an older woman in a flat between a policeman's family and a university professor. In the relaxed toleration of pre-war Nashville, law enforcers and religious representatives frequently shared residences with prostitutes.¹¹

These professional prostitutes made up only a fraction of sex trade participants. Brothel workers, barmaids, part-time sex workers, streetwalkers, and "crib women" (females who operated out of tiny, exposed rooms) formed a hierarchy that only a few antebellum reformers noticed. Rigid stereotypes of prostitutes as "dirty, intoxicated slattern[s], in tawdry finery and an inch thick in paint" overlooked the various classes of prostitutes, including the often respectable-looking "kept women" who entered into private contractual agreements and exchanged sexual favors for regular upkeep. The sex trade's hierarchy was always loosely defined: a tavern girl might try to set up a private situation with a special client or a seamstress might work weekends at a brothel. The instability of the wartime economy, however, likely blurred the prostitutes' class structure even more.¹²

The "whorearchy" became especially hazy for women who only occasionally supplemented their income with prostitution. Recently historians such as Christine Stansell, Timothy Gilfoyle, and Kathy Peiss have argued that working-class women commonly resorted to part-time prostitution to cope with spousal desertion, widowhood, or other economic disasters. In 1853, four New York teenagers worked six days a week under a seamstress for board; prostitution paid for rent, clothes, and the seventh day's food. Less than ten years later in cities overrun with enemy soldiers, the steep inflation and the volatility of the wartime economy made casual prostitution even more of a likelihood for such girls who regularly lived on the edge of destitution.¹³

Instead of addressing the economic concerns that drove many into prostitution, most antebellum city governments adopted informal disciplinary systems that provoked little public discussion of prostitution or sexuality. Beginning in 1855, Nashville's council issued sporadic ordinances against prostitution, forbidding lewd women from using vulgar language to passersby or exposing themselves in street doorways. As in many cities, police in Nashville arrested brothel madams such as Puss Pettus and Nannie McGinnis at approximately monthly intervals, fined them according to the number of prostitutes they housed, and then released them. This loose system effectively taxed madams according to how many operatives they claimed. When Nashville police hauled brothel-owner Betsy Crank into court, a reporter wryly noticed that she was "not a debutante in this institution. In fact, she has played several star engagements upon the stage of disorder." One jaded Memphis judge even offered a brothel madam a municipal loan so that she could resume her business.¹⁴

This elastic penal system treated brothel occupants much better than streetwalkers, in part because the brothels often became “hidden” from public view and seemed respectable to the casual observer. The police occasionally arrested a brothel’s inmates but usually only in extraordinary circumstances. In 1861, for example, Memphis police raided Alice Jones’s brothel and found four women consorting with a single male. According to the newspaper, the situation proved “a little too thick,” and authorities promptly arrested all participants. When policemen brought prostitutes into court it was usually for public drunkenness or street fights, not sexual misdemeanors. Reporters often had fun recounting these episodes in the newspaper. In 1861, a Nashville reporter quipped that prostitute “Nancy Wright was up before the Recorder in two cases for not doing right. Someone whose name will certainly be infamous for so ungallant of a charge had accused Nancy with being ‘drunk and disorderly,’ an accusation so monstrous and so at variance with female propriety as to cause this reporter to doubt the whole thing.” A few days later, another prostitute was charged with the same crime: “The characteristic modesty of her sex, or professional engagements preventing her attendance, her gay Lothario submitted the case and paid the fine.” Although the watchmen were restrained in their treatment of madams and brothel workers, they cracked down on streetwalkers and independent operatives flaunting their wares in public. Citizens were willing to overlook, and even in some cases support, prostitution as long as its participants stayed away from the respectable public space.¹⁵

Few citizens or city officials criticized this de facto toleration in the early stages of the war, but the spread of venereal disease among the Union troops forced the military to take up the issue. Almost 10 percent of white Union soldiers contracted syphilis or gonorrhea before leaving the army. Although only .006 percent of white soldiers died from sexually transmitted diseases, venereal disease frequently hindered soldiers’ performance in the field and made them susceptible to more debilitating illnesses.¹⁶

Military medicine was far from standardized, and doctors seldom agreed on how to treat patients with syphilis or gonorrhea. Many used saline laxatives, “iodide of potassium in syrup of sarsaparilla,” camphorated belladonna injections, and mercury, which was sometimes ingested and sometimes applied topically. Some physicians even advocated small doses of mercurial fumigation, “which deposits the mercury upon the surface of the body when in a state of perspiration induced by the heated vapor of water surrounding the patient in a close and air-tight bath.” Often the “cure” proved more dangerous than the disease, but physicians blamed their lack of positive results on camp conditions, claiming that, “It was impossible to cure gonorrhea while the patients were exposed to the rains and had to sleep on the damp ground and live on a salt and stimulating ration.”¹⁷

In fact, it was impossible for Civil War doctors to cure sexually transmitted diseases in any environment. Although historian Catherine Clinton asserts that gonorrhea and syphilis “proved entirely curable,” bacteriology was not at that time advanced sufficiently to cure venereal diseases. Indeed, scientists had only recently hypothesized that syphilis and gonorrhea were two different infections. Doctors declared a patient “cured” when his or her symptoms had only gone underground. Most symptoms, such as rashes, pus-filled bumps, moist warts, and genital swelling, typically disappeared after two to six weeks, and the patient appeared healthy. The bacteria that caused those

symptoms remained in the body, however, and often attacked internal organs many years later. Only antibiotics such as penicillin can effectively treat gonorrhea and syphilis, and they were not available until the twentieth century.¹⁸

Prevention seemed much easier than trying to cure sexually transmitted diseases in such an inhospitable environment, although officers had little success in discouraging sexual recreation. Contemporary contraceptive methods such as coitus interruptus and vaginal syringes and sponges did not prevent sexually transmitted diseases. Lamb gut condoms, although marginally successful at deterring pregnancy, did not prevent disease, and the more effective rubber condoms were not introduced until 1876. Military doctors could offer no effective way to prevent venereal disease as long as soldiers enjoyed unregulated sex.¹⁹

Concerned about the medical ramifications of unregulated prostitution, several reformers throughout the Union began to explore the possibility of adopting the successful Parisian system of licensing prostitutes, mandating regular health exams, and funding public hospitals for venereal disease. No American city had seriously discussed the possibility of licensing prostitution before the war, but many knew of international experiments in legalization. William Sanger's famous and controversial History of Prostitution used the global history of prostitution to contextualize the social issues that New Yorkers faced. In it, Sanger criticized the many disastrous and ineffective efforts made by the French to control prostitution and venereal disease. The latest attempt had occurred in 1810, when Parisians created the "police des mœurs" and compelled prostitutes to register with a central agency and to pass monthly inspections. If women failed the health exam, they landed in a prison hospital. Despite his francophobia and his harsh criticism of the French legal system, Sanger praised the French method of constructing special carriages for prostitutes so they were not seen by the general public while being transported to prison hospitals: "You may say what you please about the surface-morality of the French, but their respect for the public eye does honor to their civilization, and their law on this evil would be well adopted elsewhere." In other words, the French were to be commended for organizing a system whereby sexuality and degraded women were removed from the dominant public sphere.²⁰

Soon after the war began, newspapers started printing editorials urging their readers to aid the growing number of poverty-stricken families. The Republican Banner, for example, pleaded for "the relief of the poor of Nashville. . . . The rapidly increasing prices for the ordinary comforts of life are pressing more and more upon the simple and scanty means of numerous families in certain Wards of the city." Widows, especially those left with children, extended family members, and servants to support, suffered under almost unbearable strain. The Philadelphia Inquirer reported that "To such an extreme are the unfortunate families of soldiers driven that women in [southern] towns and cities, as a last resort, take up a life of prostitution. So general is this that the name of a 'war widow' has become synonymous with a life of debauchery."²¹

The public dilemma of destitute widows and other women with curtailed marital prospects during wartime provoked intense debate over the causes of prostitution. As the war progressed, a Memphis newspaper began running a series of articles discussing the necessity of enlarging the "sphere of female labor" so that impoverished women could earn respectable wages in a respectable manner. Although the editors did not specifically

mention prostitution, its specter haunted the discussion. One contributor railed against the “social usage in many localities [that] restricts women to less than half a dozen [respectable] occupations.” His argument implied that disadvantaged women had little choice in such a restrictive environment but to prostitute themselves. With so few options available, even women born with the “innate” womanly virtues of piety and purity could be driven to prostitution. A lady might choose death over dishonor, but the prospect of abandoning her children would be unthinkable. As one prostitute grieved, “I chose [death] long ago for myself; but what shall I do for my mother and child?” Although a Boston woman uttered those words, they reflected the thoughts and words of many prostitutes elsewhere. Shortly before the war, for example, Mary Ann Kelly’s prostitution in Nashville provided the only livelihood for her three children and aged mother. The ensuing bloody wartime strife created even more households without traditional male providers. Those who believed that socio-economic forces forced women into prostitution tended to be more sympathetic to sex workers’ wartime plight.²²

Not everyone agreed that the lack of acceptable occupations forced women into prostitution; only with the rise of the Progressive movement in the late nineteenth-century did such a viewpoint gain real popularity. During the war, most American observers pointed to an inherent weakness or sexual appetite in certain women. After all, as one editor wrote, prostitution flourished even in cities such as Chicago, which had over sixty respectable occupations for ladies. Another writer sniped, “It is oftener woman than her wrongs that needs to be redressed.” William Acton, a British physician often quoted in nineteenth-century America, and William Sanger, a prominent and controversial New York physician, both treated and studied prostitutes infected with venereal disease. Although the Atlantic Ocean separate their studies, they both argued that the majority of prostitutes entered the sex trade because of their natural sinfulness, indolence, and love of drink, fashion, bad companions, and other vile amusements.²³

People who blamed prostitutes’ character defects for their vocation were usually quick to see how visible prostitution threatened the bourgeoisie. In 1863, the Memphis Daily Appeal printed a poem that essentially branded the war widow a conniving prostitute: “She can lure, and catch, and play you as the angler does the trout. . . . She has studied human nature, she is schooled in all her arts.” War widows may have entered prostitution to stave off destitution, but the poem implied that such women knowingly ensnared innocent soldiers fresh from the country. Many readers understood the popular connection between danger, women, and sexuality. One journalist quipped, “Henry Ward Beecher says ‘woman is nearer akin to angels than man is.’ That may be, but woman first got intimate to the devil.” An implicit association between sexuality and feminine evils underlies this lighthearted jest. Several articles explicitly charged that corrupt women created an “atmosphere . . . [so] that men, who were once honest, become tainted in principle and depraved in conduct.” As the female embodiment of sexuality, prostitutes wielded almost magical power over male restraint. Such antagonism toward sex workers would only intensify as the war increased their visibility.²⁴

CHAPTER II

“IT IS A PERFECT SODOM”: PROSTITUTION IN UNION-OCCUPIED CITIES, 1863-1865

By 1863, urban authorities throughout the Union were eager to remove prostitutes from the public eye. Union army officials and civilians in occupied southern cities and other military posts, such as Washington, Norfolk, and New Orleans, especially worried about the threat to respectability posed by prostitution and other forms of immorality. The many Union soldiers garrisoned in these cities had time and money to spare and felt little compulsion to privatize their sexual activities.

Prostitution was hardly a novel enterprise in the nation’s bustling capital, but the Civil War introduced a new trend. Before the war, bawdy houses and prostitutes fluctuated according to seasonal population: the sex trade flourished while Congress was in session and abated once the politicians and hangers-on left town. However, prostitutes entered a new era when a sustained population of soldiers flooded the city. Few leaders at first recognized the problem that such a population explosion of temporarily single men unfettered by either their families or communities would pose, but as the war dragged on few citizens could ignore the social or medical ramifications.

Soon after the war commenced, the municipal government mandated that “all buildings, places, or tenements resorted to for prostitution, lewdness, or illegal gaming, or used for illegal keeping or sale of intoxicating liquors shall be deemed common nuisances” and the owners imprisoned for up to a year or fined up to one thousand dollars. The order accomplished little. After the city provost marshal recorded 450 brothels in 1862, he issued General Order 17, which encouraged the arrest of vagrants, drunkards, and “public prostitutes and all persons who lead a lewd and lascivious life.” Once convicted, the prostitutes could either pay a fine, which was returnable after six months of good behavior, or spend up to ninety days confined to a workhouse. The police arrested seventy-five women under this order. Not only did this number fall far short of the brothel count, but only ten of the women were actually arrested for prostitution. Most faced indictments for inebriation, loitering, and disorderly conduct, although one black prostitute was arrested and fined five dollars for “walking with a white man.” Evidently, the police were more concerned with blatantly visible activities than with inconspicuous immorality.¹

As elsewhere in the country, the arrests in Washington followed a consistent pattern. Policemen harassed streetwalkers and riotous working-class brothels while overlooking the “orderly and discreet” houses. Maria Kauffman, the madam of a lower-class brothel, complained about the inequitable treatment after her arrest in October 1863. She never pretended innocence, but she did protest that she was being unfairly harassed “when indictments against such parties as Mary Hall, Sarah Austin, and others who keep the upper-ten style of houses of the class [are] not called up.” Although police were well aware of their existence, they tended to view elegant brothels and discreet assignation houses simply as profitable nuisances. They had little desire to interrupt the pleasures of the wealthy and powerful men who enjoyed these premises. Policemen usually collected

bribes and enjoyed the houses' hospitality as long as the establishments did not disturb the neighbors.²

Kauffman's complaints found their way into the newspapers and became impossible for neighbors or police to ignore. Authorities arrested many of the city's elite madams about three months after Kauffman's trial, but even then the courts only half-heartedly administered justice. The court found Mary Hall guilty of running a bawdy house, but it left no records of any punishment levied against her. Her prominent position in society and her well-placed friends probably helped her escape severe punishment. Hall had built a reputation twenty years before the war for hosting elaborate and elegant receptions. By 1864, she boasted probably the largest bawdy operation in Washington, and her property was more than quadruple its prewar value. Hall and several of her prostitutes were perhaps among the sex workers who, as one contemporary reported, publicly lobbied for beneficial legislation in Congress by "displaying to excellent advantage their gorgeous apparel with half revealing monuments of maternity peeping over brilliant bodices, and arms dressed in rouge that helps nature amazingly." (Further studies may be able to indicate if such lobbying actually influenced legislation.)³

Most prostitutes in Washington probably did not engage in political lobbying, especially those who sympathized with the Confederacy. Instead of formal petitioning, secessionist sex workers often expressed their sentiments by harassing soldiers and drunkenly cheering for Jefferson Davis and the Confederacy. Instead of trying to control rowdy secessionist prostitutes, Washington authorities granted safe passage to any woman who preferred to live in the rebel capital of Richmond. Sex workers made up almost 12 percent of the 600 applicants for safe passage in 1863. This was an easy and effective way to rid the city of southern sympathizers who might use their gender and sexual identity to create social disorder and political intrigue.⁴

Although many prostitutes thus abandoned the city, many others remained to engage in the lucrative business that Union soldiers offered. During the summer of 1863, a Union private named Cavins wrote to his wife exclaiming over the number of brothels and prostitutes blatantly advertising their wares in public: "I would rather be farther off from town. It is said that one house of every ten is a bawdy house--it is a perfect Sodom." One newspaper estimated in 1864 that 5,000 prostitutes were working in the city proper and thousands more in its suburbs, especially Union-occupied Alexandria.⁵

As 1863 drew to a close, municipal leaders in Washington began discussing the possibility of licensing the thousands of prostitutes who trolled the city streets each day. The prospect of legalizing and publicly approving immorality scandalized many; one newspaper editor snidely inquired "whether this is the 'age of purity' that was to begin with the Lincoln Administration." The municipal government ultimately did not legalize prostitution, possibly because the conversation was placing prostitution even more prominently into the public sphere than it had been before.⁶

The capital's Military Provost Office tried to control prostitution by collecting information on sex workers in the city. In 1864, the office duly recorded the names and addresses of almost one hundred brothels within the city limit, the number of prostitutes in each house, and what quality of service was provided by each. As in many northeastern cities, Irish madams were predominant among the less fancy establishments. The largest brothel, barely larger than Rebecca Wiggins's establishment in Nashville,

housed eighteen sex workers. Unlike those in Nashville, the bawdy houses in Washington seem to have been strictly segregated by race. Despite the recording of brothels, military officials did little to control the prostitutes inside them.⁷

Washington authorities chose not to fully address the perplexing topic of prostitution, but that did not keep the issue from public notice. As one newspaper editor commented, anybody who pretended ignorance of wartime prostitution possessed the “false squeamishness of the young lady, who refused to wear a watch in her bosom, because it had hands.” Even though news articles frequently shied away from mentioning the term “prostitutes,” readers understood the base nature of the “frail daughters of Eve” and women “famous for public hospitality.” Tacking euphemistic titles on to disreputable women could not conceal prostitutes’ all too visible presence.⁸

Many articles poked fun at the flood of women streaming through court, but serious undertones lay beneath the frivolity. One paper reprinted a news article about a lieutenant who frequently visited seven or eight girls at a favorite brothel. The officer’s wife, suspecting his loyalty “not to his country but to herself,” secretly visited his post and followed him to the bawdy house. After confronting him and his harem, she left the city on an early train and went back to live with her parents, “having previously assured her husband, in a mild, good-natured manner, that the country air and a bill of divorce would do her good.” The flippant words masked a serious national dilemma resulting from marital infidelity, both in terms of standards of morality and in squandering money. As one soldier wrote about the mounting social cost of war, “The more we see the more we are convinced that this war is the most damnable curse that ever was brung upon the human family.”⁹

Union-occupied Norfolk, Virginia, experienced similar problems with prostitution, despite the provost marshal’s best efforts to punish prostitutes. Prostitution was hardly a new phenomenon in Norfolk. More than a decade before the war, one man wrote of a friend that “If he comes by way of Norfolk, he will find any number of pretty hookers in the Brick Row, not far from French’s Hotel.” Although the town had only recently been incorporated, sailors had enjoyed Norfolk’s hospitality ever since the first Continental Navy Yard was established in 1801. The war only abetted Norfolk’s flesh trade. One soldier stationed in Virginia noted that Portsmouth and Norfolk were nicknamed “Sodom and Gomorrah on account of the wickedness.” (He also noted that many of the prostitutes were from his home state of Connecticut.) But the military and civil authorities generally ignored Norfolk sex workers who conducted their affairs discreetly. Those who flaunted their profession in the streets, however, were often marched into the court and charged as “common prostitutes.” White prostitutes could choose between a twenty-dollar fine and one month of hard labor. Those who could do so paid the fee instead of foregoing an entire month’s earnings. Indeed, the court recorder did not report any instance where a prostitute chose hard labor over paying the fine. Allowing the white prostitutes to choose their punishment amounted to military complicity in the sex trade.¹⁰

The Norfolk provost court frequently tried large groups of prostitutes, sometimes as many as eighteen at a time. Women accused of “keeping a house of ill fame” and men accused of “keeping a disorderly house” were generally fined and evicted, and their liquor was confiscated. In rare instances, madams especially infamous for their drunken,

riotous gatherings would be fined a hefty charge and commanded to “leave the lines of the department by the way of the city of Baltimore within twenty days.” Thus, the authorities sent away the most notorious women while allowing the more circumspect sex workers to operate outside of the public view.¹¹

The Norfolk provost court also contributed to the racialization of the sex trade. Although white sex workers could purchase their freedom with a twenty-dollar bill, black prostitutes rarely had the choice to pay. Instead, they were generally sentenced to “hard labor on Craney Island until discharged by the Supervisor of Negro Affairs.” Georgetta Reid, one of the few black prostitutes to receive a definite sentence, faced six months of hard labor on the island, a disease-ridden military outpost, instead of being able to choose between thirty days of labor or paying a fine. Ultimately, this racially biased system meant that white prostitutes had more opportunity than blacks to either build savings or marry out of the sex trade.¹²

New Orleans easily surpassed Norfolk as a center of military-supported prostitution. The sex trade had thrived in antebellum New Orleans, but the war probably increased it. In the 1850s, the city had lost a large portion of the Mississippi River trade to major railroad hubs, which meant fewer transient river workers seeking brothels for prostitution or for cheap sleeping quarters. Prostitutes still tramped across the city, mostly Irish and German women, but they kept to the seedier districts away from the more respectable quarters.¹³

The influx of well-paid Union officers and enlisted men eager to patronize the city’s prostitutes dramatically increased the sex workers’ visibility. No longer confined to the low-rent districts and riverside taverns, prostitutes now conspicuously promenaded along city thoroughfares with their military companions. One Confederate newspaper reprinted the scandalous news: “The hotels are filled, it is true, but it is with Yankee officers, civil and military . . . shamelessly parading at the tables de hote with the prostitutes they have brought with them from the Northern cities. Unhappy New Orleans!” Although Confederates were eager to believe anything about the enemy, there was no denying that the city had a revitalized sex trade.¹⁴

In multiple reports to Washington, Surgeon J. G. Brandt complained about the difficulty of treating venereal disease in New Orleans, where syphilis was especially prevalent. Despite having “no faith in the empirical use of balsams and diuretics” or “mercurials,” Brandt felt compelled to use internal and external applications of mercury along with diuretics and sulphate and chloride of zinc injections in order to stem the rising tide of disease. Although Brandt and other doctors worried about prostitutes spreading venereal disease, they also believed the women would infect the city with drunkenness, laziness, yellow fever, and cholera, especially along the waterfront. Many feared that allowing social ills to flourish publicly would exacerbate physical ills.¹⁵

Authorities in Washington, Norfolk, and New Orleans all struggled to deal with sex workers’ increased visibility while consistently treating black prostitutes differently from white prostitutes. Regardless of the women’s race, however, both civilians and military officials blamed sex workers for the physical diseases, moral crises, and social ills arising from prostitution, instead of focusing on provost courts that tacitly encouraged the sex trade or on the socio-economic conditions that drove many women to choose prostitution.

CHAPTER III

“WOMEN AND WHISKEY ARE PLENTIFUL HERE”: LEGALIZING PROSTITUTION IN NASHVILLE AND MEMPHIS, 1863-1865

Although authorities in many cities attempted to control the sex trade in various ways, those in two cities in Tennessee--Nashville and Memphis--experimented most boldly with legalized prostitution. The movement to legalize prostitution in Nashville began in June 1863, when Brigadier General R. S. Granger noted that officers and medical personnel repeatedly petitioned for him to “save the army from [venereal disease,] a fate worse . . . than to perish on the battlefield.” Granger claimed to be “daily and almost hourly beset” by such problems. This was perhaps an exaggeration, yet venereal disease posed a real problem for his troops.¹

Determined to safeguard soldiers from the danger of contracting gonorrhea or syphilis, Granger ordered Nashville’s provost marshal, Lieutenant Colonel George Spalding, to “rid the city of diseased prostitutes infesting it.” Although some historians have argued that Union officials reacted out of concern for the physical or moral well-being of prostitutes, language such as Granger’s clearly conveys officials’ lack of concern for the women. The *Nashville Dispatch* reinforced this view, commenting that the women were “demoralizing the army . . . [and] their removal is a military necessity.”²

Newspapers showed little interest in the wellbeing of the “nymphs du paves.” A court reporter who told of two women arrested after returning from “a large champagne party in one of the thoroughfares inhabited by the under-crust of the codfish aristocracy of Smokey Row” could not be accused of over-sympathizing with the prostitutes. One observer of Spalding’s roundup gleefully described “squads of soldiers . . . engaged in the laudable business of heaping furniture out of the various dens and then tumbling their disconsolate owners after.” Another gentleman piously wished that “this course toward bad women will have a salutatory effect upon the morals of the soldiers.” Few civilians or military men worried about the other ways that creative soldiers might find to alleviate boredom and loneliness, let alone how the disowned and penniless women would fare after such harsh treatment; instead, they concentrated on how the soldiers would benefit medically from decreased temptation and how the absence of prostitutes’ demoralizing influence would elevate both the military and society. Prostitutes seemed to be a convenient scapegoat for³

Spalding commanded Captain John Newcomb to take the prostitutes to Louisville, Kentucky, in his new steamboat, the *Idahoe*, to ensure the permanent removal of Nashville’s public women. Anywhere from 40 to 1,400 white prostitutes--“parcels of frail humanity, done up in dry goods and crinoline,” as one observer mockingly described them--were forcibly exported. Newcomb protested having to put so many prostitutes on his boat and tried to convince the military to use other, older steamboats in the area. Not only did Spalding refuse to change ships, he also refused to provide guards, food, or other supplies for the passengers. The captain later complained, “I told [Spalding] it would forever ruin her reputation as a passenger boat if they were put on her. It has done so—

she is now since known as the Floating Whorehouse.” Nashville citizens ignored the foreboding signs of a hastily prepared mission and cheered the Idahoe’s departure on July 8, 1863, saying, “Wayward sisters, go in peace.”⁴

Even as Newcomb and his passengers began steaming north, some citizens called for the similar deportation of black sex workers: “So barefaced are these black prostitutes becoming, that they parade the streets, and even the public square, by day and night. An order has just been received notifying all the white prostitutes to leave town immediately. Why not issue a similar order against the blacks?” As it became apparent that the military was not going to do anything, protests became more strident: “Unless the aggravated curse of lechery as it exists among the Negresses of the town is destroyed by rigid military or civil mandates, or the indiscriminate expulsion of the guilty sex, the ejection of the white class will turn out to have been productive of the sin it was intended to eradicate. . . . We trust that, while in the humor of ridding our town of libidinous white women, General Granger will dispose of the hundreds of . . . black ones who are making our fair city a Gomorrah.” The military, for whatever reason, ignored these demands. White prostitutes’ former clientele quickly began frequenting black sex workers and creating even more of a public furor.⁵

Spalding may have been reluctant to banish black prostitutes because he realized that his deportation scheme was an utter failure. When Newcomb and his passengers arrived in Louisville, military guards refused to allow them to disembark. This refusal may have stemmed from too much exposure to Nashville’s diseased residents. The previous winter, Nashville authorities had bundled several hundred public women onto a train and sent them to a reluctant Louisville under military escort. Several months later, Spalding sent three hundred soldiers with venereal disease to Louisville hospitals. The city had no use for so many extra people, especially ones likely to infect permanent residents. Only fourteen women were permitted to leave the Idahoe; the rest remained stuck on board.⁶

Newcomb and his ship full of women received the same abysmal treatment for the rest of their ill-fated trip. Louisville authorities ordered the boat upriver to Cincinnati, where, on July 17, 1863, port authorities again denied it harbor. Newcomb stayed in Ohio for two weeks until the federal government ordered him and his passengers back to Nashville. The “Floating Whorehouse” then returned to the city, its mission a complete and public failure. The Dispatch reported that crowds of people gathered at the wharf, jostling each other to see the ship’s “precious freight” return to “resume their former modes of life.” Newcomb angrily demanded compensation for his ship’s lost reputation, for the physical damages it suffered, and for the prostitutes’ food and medicine, which he had had to purchase. According to Newcomb, his three-month-old ship had been vandalized by his vengeful passengers after he had tried to eject male clients from his boat. The Idahoe’s lost reputation proved even more costly than its physical damages. Newcomb sold his share of the ship shortly after the war, and it steamed down to the only city willing to receive it, infamous New Orleans. An army officer commenting on Newcomb’s petition wrote, “The whole charge should really fall upon General Morgan [Spalding’s superior] who should have surmised that no community would tolerate such an importation and should not therefore have put the government to this expense.” The captain received \$5,000 for damages after the war, but the government never reimbursed

his passengers for their traumatic month-long confinement onboard the Idahoe or for their loss of income. Deportation had not been intended to protect prostitutes' interest but to purify Nashville's public space.⁷

Faced with public ridicule and the conspicuous failure of deportation, Spalding suggested another plan of attack, this time a system of licensed prostitution for white women with frequent health inspections to identify infected sex workers. The military also established a hospital for male victims of venereal diseases, but Spalding did not suggest any program with similar mandatory health exams or permits for soldiers known to frequent brothels. Military commanders primarily viewed prostitution as a health threat, not as a moral one, and they blamed prostitutes for transmitting venereal diseases to their troops. Soldiers, although obviously an integral part of prostitution, were not scrutinized or restricted as closely as female participants. Spalding's order, while a positive step toward relieving a serious medical problem, actually did little more than to gender responsibility for sexually transmitted diseases.⁸

Enacted on August 20, 1863, the order declared:

- 1st That a license be issued to each prostitute, a record of which shall be kept at this office, together with the number and street of her residence.
- 2nd That one skillful surgeon be appointed as a Board of Examination whose duty it shall be to examine personally every week, each licensed prostitute, giving certificate of soundness to those who are healthy and ordering those into hospital those who are in the slightest degree diseased.
- 3rd That a building suitable for a hospital for the invalids be taken for that purpose, and that a weekly tax of fifty cents be levied on each prostitute for the purpose of defraying the expenses of said hospital.
- 4th That all public women found plying their vocation without license and certificate be at once arrested and incarcerated in the workhouse for a period of not less than thirty days.⁹

The last provision ensured that brothel madams could no longer pay off fines to evade the law. Instead, illegal prostitution would cost a woman her freedom and income for at least one month. Brothel owners also found it more difficult now to buy off authorities. The police imprisoned twelve unregistered prostitutes in the first month and twenty-eight more in the second. By the spring of 1864, 352 white prostitutes had registered, 92 of whom had been treated for venereal disease.¹⁰

Surprisingly few Nashville residents condemned the experiment on moral grounds. One unusual letter from someone named Comstock complained to the army's Assistant Inspector General about Spalding selling prostitute licenses, but the writer's primary objection seemed to be that Spalding supposedly accepted Confederate money for licenses. Comstock demanded "that the defect should be remedied and the Confederate money turned over to the proper Quartermaster for secret service." The general absence of public complaint suggests that prostitution had become such a problem that Nashvillians seemed eager for any way to control it.¹¹

Once the program succeeded in managing white sex workers, the provost marshal expanded the experiment to include blacks. Spalding had learned from the deportation

debacle that prostitutes of both races must be dealt with. Some white soldiers frequented black prostitutes to save money, for black prostitutes probably could not charge the five-dollar-per-night “bargain” rate that Private Henry Schelling had mentioned. Others expressly sought out the novelty of black prostitution. For example, few soldiers thought it unusual for First Lieutenant Thomas Baldwin to bring a black prostitute to camp until he insisted on leaving his tent flaps open. Second Lieutenant George Parrot also succumbed to temptation when he “did become drunk and have sexual intercourse with a Negro or colored woman in the presence of his guard and did remain on said . . . colored woman 30 minutes or more until Corporal Ellis made him get off.” Curiously, although contemporary newspapers condemned black prostitution, they carefully avoided mentioning their white clientele. Spalding followed this pattern of willful ignorance by never publicly attempting to restrict interracial sex or to regulate any non-medical aspect of the business. By August 1864, officials had registered 456 white Cyprians and 50 black.¹²

Prostitutes initially reported to the surgeon’s office every fortnight, but Dr. William M. Chambers soon required examinations every ten days in order to treat infectious sex workers more promptly. Chambers and his staff examined the women for pus, discharge, open sores, or other visible symptoms of venereal disease. In his January 31, 1865, report, Chambers described the procedure: the prostitutes “enter a reception room which is comfortably furnished and in cold or disagreeable weather well heated. They pass in time from this apartment into an adjoining examination room in which there are a bed, a table, and all the necessary appliances for examining them.” Women who passed the exam received certificates and a figurative public seal of approval. Those who failed proceeded to Hospital Number Eleven, a former Catholic bishop’s house, which the military had converted first into a smallpox hospital and then into a hospital for infected prostitutes. The hospital, nicknamed “the Pest House,” had a living room, a treatment room, twenty beds, guards, a matron, a nurse, a cook, and a general laborer. Licensed prostitutes could enter the hospital for any illness without additional charges because the prostitutes’ examination fees paid for all of the hospital’s expenses. Once the women’s symptoms disappeared, they “returned to duty.”¹³

The system seemed to work well partly because of Chamber’s paternal nature and hard work. A man of fifty years, Chambers had apparently become a father figure to many of the soldiers with whom he worked, and he was genuinely concerned for their welfare. When military guards arrested a young soldier in his hospital, for example, Chambers arranged for his release and promised to be responsible for his appearance in court. The doctor’s solicitation crossed class and racial boundaries as he tried to look after the prostitutes in his care. After black Cyprians complained about receiving threats, he requested “that a guard of two men be detailed to protect persons and property of colored prostitutes” who stayed in Hospital Number 15. Presumably the four black women who worked as laborer, cook, nurse, and servant did not need protection.¹⁴

Many in the community had mixed feelings about the “Pest House,” but head surgeon Robert Fletcher proudly declared the program of licensing, inspection, and treatment an “undoubted success” medically and financially. He hoped that the future would bring stricter regulation, but he believed that Spalding’s systems, although hastily instituted, was a good start. Fletcher was especially proud of how legalizing prostitution

improved the health of Union troops. Supposedly, only thirteen of the almost 31,000 soldiers admitted to Hospital Number Fifteen with venereal diseases after February 1864 had contracted their disease in Nashville. Military records, however, may not tell the whole story, since many transient soldiers probably did not realize that they contracted a disease until after they left Nashville. Nevertheless, it is likely that the Nashville system significantly reduced the transmission of venereal diseases.¹⁵

Inspecting and hospitalizing both men and women for venereal disease also had the interesting effect of allowing medical officers to note how venereal disease spread. Dominant ideology both before and after the war accused the prostitute of being “the cause of numerous infections, not only to her male companions, but to the innocent wives and children at home.” Although prostitutes obviously did not contract sexually transmitted diseases on their own, few doctors looked at clients as anything but victims. Dr. Chambers, however, noted a curious phenomenon in February, 1864. Prior to February, the hospitals had recorded a fairly constant rate of infected patients. But now, as reenlisted veterans poured into the city, no doubt taking advantage of the furloughs granted for reenlisting, an astonishingly high number of soldiers checked into the male venereal disease ward. Soon after, Chambers noted a corresponding epidemic among registered prostitutes. Since he had regularly examined the women up to that time, he knew that they had been disease-free before the great influx of soldiers. Although few colleagues listened, Chambers concluded that the soldiers had transmitted venereal disease to their otherwise uncontaminated female partners. Widespread acknowledgement of this, however, would have required a reassessment of the double standard that penalized prostitutes and overlooked patrons.¹⁶

Whereas Fletcher calculated the program’s success in terms of the troops’ welfare, Chambers declared legalization a success because of its “civilizing” effect on the prostitutes. He proudly noted that “When the inspections were first enforced many [prostitutes] were exceedingly filthy in their persons and apparel and obscene and coarse in their language, but this soon gave place to cleanliness and propriety.” In part, the better quality of registered sex workers resulted from “many of the better class of prostitutes [being] drawn to Nashville from northern cities by the comparative protection from venereal disease which its license system afforded.” According to Chambers, the “benefit to both prostitutes and soldiers” made the added labor worthwhile. Some prostitutes may have welcomed his “guidance,” but others had their own reasons to adopt middle-class appearances. Some women probably appeared cleaner because they had washed away pus or other suspicious discharges before an examination. Other workers may have simply adopted a façade to avoid lectures on deportment, rants on personal hygiene, and extra time spent in the examination room when they could be earning money. Changes in the behavior of public women did not result solely from the edict; the prostitutes’ reactions to the edict also played a role.¹⁷

The transformation in prostitutes’ demeanor may have also resulted from these women developing a quasi-professional pride. According to observers, sex workers enjoyed flashing their government-issued credentials at potential clients. Reportedly, only four sex workers objected to the system after the first few months, and soon Chambers noted that “all but a few of the most abandoned are pleased with [regulation] and its effects.” Despite his social biases and his inability to speak for all prostitutes, Chambers’

statement seems to be corroborated through other sources. Although public women initially registered at “bayonet-point,” the rapid increase in voluntarily registered prostitutes, especially women who sought medical treatment, implies the eventual popularity of Spalding’s order as women found ways to turn it to their benefit.¹⁸

The increasing number of registered sex workers brought prostitutes of differing geographic and socio-economic backgrounds to more into contact with one another. Although many brothels crowded together on Smokey Row, numerous prostitutes had lived scattered throughout the city and presumably lacked regular, amicable contact with each other. Nashville’s sex workers certainly did not live solitary lives before legalization, but usually their interactions revolved around professional rivalries. Newspaper editors reveled in the tawdry details; a typical news account read, “Sally Jane bit, Eliza Ann gouged, and Cleopatra of the rooster plume, subsided on her back and kicked like grim death in a frolic.” The mandatory registration and medical exams, however, required public women to gather regularly at a common location for non-competitive purposes, thereby promoting a sense of community.¹⁹

Under legalization, Chambers noted an increase in brothel workers and a corresponding decrease in the “more abandoned” streetwalkers. In a sense, the brothels represented unionization of sex workers. Madams collected money from inmates, whether in the form of a flat “rent” or a percentage of their earnings. They also frequently laid down house rules pertaining to client entertainment and sex work outside the house. In return, the madams usually ran legal interference for their residents and could choose to charge standard rates instead of leave sex workers at the mercy of their clients’ demands. In some of the more elite houses, madams went even further to protect their residents by enforcing strict codes of conduct for clientele. Although an accidental ramification of regulation, the new predominance of brothels often benefited their residents.²⁰

Whether or not sex workers felt more unified, residents saw them as such. After legalization, soldiers’ letters and newspapers increasingly referred to prostitutes as a single body monopolizing public venues. Infantryman John Watkins wrote to his wife from Nashville with common sentiments: “It seems though there was nothing else here [but prostitutes]. For they monopolise everything. All the public hack 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 maintainers.” Although the number of streetwalkers had evidently decreased, the visibility of brothel prostitutes had actually increased because of military sponsorship.²¹

Despite the decrease in their number, regulation did benefit casual prostitutes as well as brothel workers. Their new legal status meant that Nashville’s prostitutes began enjoying official protection instead of skulking in shadows and enduring corrupt policemen, vicious clients, and fine-happy judges. Brothel madams also profited from the system because purchasing licenses and exams cost less than paying ten or twenty-five dollar fines every month. Regulation created other advantages as well. Mary Alloway, a black woman, profited from Spalding’s order less than a month after it was passed. Alloway canceled her renters’ leases so that two higher-paying white prostitutes could rent rooms. The former tenants went to court complaining that they had been evicted so

that notorious prostitutes could live in their rooms. The judge allowed Alloway to eject the two gentlemen because the registered sex workers were not breaking any law. Instead of triumphing, the two renters had to pay court costs and vacate their rooms. Courts had seemingly extended their protection to include public women.²²

Two hundred miles west of Nashville, Memphis experienced a similar crisis in prostitution after Union forces occupied the city on June 6, 1862. Perched on a riverbank, Memphis served as a convenient depot for thousands of Union soldiers, and prostitutes were eager to take advantage of the military coin. One Memphis resident boasted that, unlike Nashville with its Smokey Row, his city had no special area renowned for thieves and prostitutes. This was true; prostitution and violence flourished in every quarter of the city.²³

Memphis newspapers first mentioned prostitution in 1858, but sex workers had established their presence long before then. Sailors, merchants, and other itinerants had constantly passed through the town since its founding. By 1860, Memphis declared itself to be the world's largest inland cotton market and annually shipped out approximately 400,000 bales of cotton. The Memphis & Charleston Railroad opened its depot on the east end of Beale Street in 1857, creating a hustling business corridor that catered to the many desires of travelers who came by river and railroad. With Memphis's population almost doubling between 1860 and 1870, prostitutes found ample opportunity to expand their trade during the Civil War.²⁴

Although sex workers enjoyed a booming market, professional competition still fostered brutal hostilities. Violence, according to one scholar, "proved the most dangerous and overwhelming characteristic of life as a public woman in Memphis." Newspapers commonly reported on brothel fights, public disturbances involving rocks, eggs, and other items thrown through brothel windows, and prostitutes warding off aggressors with bowie knives. Anyone who attended the Recorder's Court could expect frequently entertaining and ribald court cases involving prostitutes. Young men regularly congregated around Jackson Mound to watch prostitutes battling out personal antagonisms and professional rivalries. Beale and Gayoso streets were infamous for their riotous brothels; one raucous ball held beneath the summer moon ended with every female in attendance hauled into the Recorder's Court. The court exempted all of the male participants from standing trial, which highlights the gendering of accountability for public actions.²⁵

Brothel districts such as Hell's Half Acre, Whiskey Hollow, and Happy Valley thrived in affluent business districts and derelict slums alike, although the Court Square, the riverfront, and Gayoso Street enjoyed an especially brisk sex trade. The old Memphis Theater staged fabulous balls two or three nights a week where "dissolute men and lewd women held their midnight orgies." Many brothels operated behind the façade of boarding houses and millineries. In one article about city revelry, the Memphis Bulletin slyly described popular millineries with their "hoops, dry goods, fashionable bonnets and their fastidious, fantastical and fascinating owners." Prostitutes continually sought new ways to market their services. Sailors passing through Memphis and seeking sex did not even have to disembark: resourceful individuals turned flatboats into floating brothels along the riverbank. River prostitutes often advertised their wares by skinny-dipping in

the warm Wolf River, wearing what one observer referred to as “a costume similar to that worn by Mrs. Eve at the time of her courtship.”²⁶

Union infantryman George Hovey Cadman was appalled by the prostitutes who swarmed into camp as soon as his unit entered Memphis: “Women and whiskey 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. . . . [Prostitutes enter the camp] with their bodies strung round with whiskey under their clothes and sell themselves and a bottle for a dollar.” Sex workers’ visibility soared as soldiers indulged themselves, and officers focused on military occupation matters instead of arresting these “disorderly” women.²⁷

Less than two weeks after Union troops entered Memphis, however, Provost Marshal John H. Gould found it necessary to issue a special order stating, “Lewd women are prohibited from conversing with soldiers while on duty; nor will they be allowed to walk the streets after sunset. Anyone of the class indicated who shall violate this order will be conveyed across the river and will not be allowed to return within the limits of the city.” The same day that newspapers published the order, military police escorted the infamous Puss Pettus across the river. Soldiers deported fifty other prostitutes that summer, but Memphis residents complained to their newspapers that such measures were still ineffectual. July’s newspapers described prostitutes openly fraternizing with soldiers and decried the police’s inability to deal with prostitution. Many argued that courts only fined prostitutes instead of deporting them and that prostitutes’ brisk business ensured that they could easily pay their fines. Citizens began lobbying the military to shut down “homes of ill fame, punishing officers and soldiers for associating with the inmates of those houses and making it a heavy penalty for steamboatmen to bring lewd women down the river.”²⁸

The provost marshal listened to the petitions. On May 1, 1863, Memphis military authorities implemented a plan similar to Nashville’s ill-fated deportation scheme. Special Order 13 gave prostitutes ten days to leave Memphis. If known prostitutes waited any longer to leave, they would be arrested and shipped north, and their property would be confiscated. Curiously, the order did not specify whether the prostitutes would be sent to a prison, a hospital, or another location. The military simply wanted the prostitutes out of Memphis and away from public sight.²⁹

The order not only expelled prostitutes but also attempted to prevent them from even entering the city. Special Order 13 prohibited steamboats “from bringing to this District and landing, as passengers, ‘prostitutes’ or women of disreputable character.” As the war progressed, newspapers lamented that “the steamboats plying between this and other cities North of here have not the same respectability that characterized them in former years.” One gentleman wrote in to criticize the river traffic: “scarcely a steamboat but brings an addition to our already large population of lewd women, who make exhibitions of themselves upon our streets, and, for the time, seem to have taken possession of the city.” Lewd Northern women were invading Memphis and appropriating the public spaces for themselves. As one article complained, “It has almost become proverbial that Memphis is the great rendezvous for prostitutes and ‘pimps.’ When a woman could ply her vocation no longer in St. Louis, Chicago, or Cincinnati, she was fitted up in her best attire and shipped to Memphis, and in more cases than one to prevent the ‘package’ from being miscarried, was accompanied by gentlemen (heaven

save the mark) with the insignia of rank.” To many residents, the high visibility of prostitutes had made Memphis a national embarrassment.³⁰

Although women from other parts of the country did flock to Memphis’s prosperous sex market, many citizens refused to admit that desperate poverty drove many natives to prostitution. Women seldom entered full-time prostitution on a lark. Poverty, violence, disease, and chemical addictions drove many of these women to prostitute themselves; adding more constraints such as the military order could hardly solve the problem.

The order failed to bring about the return to Eden for which so many had hoped. Venereal diseases continued to spread, and prostitutes still worked their trade inside the city. A local writer noted the arrest of a prostitute nicknamed “the incorrigible, [who] keeps a rill of the worst sort of whiskey trickling into her shattered old carcass, and makes her appearance at the criminal dock once or twice a week on average.” If anything, the provost marshal’s order expelling prostitutes made Memphis’s problem even more visible to the nation. One New England paper derisively wondered if Chicago’s Copperheads had been influenced by the “thirty secesh [secessionist] courtesans expelled from Memphis [who had] taken up their residence in Chicago.”³¹

Memphis residents complained about the prolific and very public “display of highly colored daubs and photographs of naked women, obscene groups, etc., in the windows and stands of our stationers, booksellers, and newsdealers. . . . 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.” Erotic photographs, pornography, and prostitution were properly a part of the private male world; inserting them into the public space where wives and daughters might notice them was unacceptable.³²

Desperate for solutions, Lt. Colonel T. H. Harris, the assistant adjutant general and Memphis mayor, sent a Dr. Coxe to study Nashville’s regulation system. News of the program’s success had spread to Memphis, and many wanted to begin a similar program in their city that would require health inspections, licenses, police oversight, and sanitary regulations to reduce the transmission of venereal and other diseases. Dr. Coxe’s first-hand account of the profitability and medical efficiency of Nashville’s system convinced Harris to implement a similar program in Memphis.³³

Unlike the Nashville authorities, however, Harris refused to sanction black prostitution, even though the visibility of prostitution also highlighted the frequency of interracial sex. A court reporter recorded the case of one black woman who headed either a brothel or an assignation house: “Jane lives in a notoriously base neighborhood on Beal street. She takes in washing and it so happened, unfortunately for her, that certain parties of conflicting color, and conflicting sex, met at her residence the other evening to patronize her, but so far forgot their errand as to engage in a noisy jollification which drew an officer to the spot who spotted Jane and returned for her the next morning.”³⁴

Harris only ordered the “inmates of all public houses and all other white Cyprians” to register. This policy was influenced not by any dearth of black sex workers in Memphis but most likely by a sharp rise in the free black population and the accompanying racial tensions. Nashville experienced a similar surge of free black

immigrants, but few African Americans there held positions of authority. Memphis, however, served as the headquarters of the Third and Seventh U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery and six other black regiments. The army authorized designated African-American troops to patrol Memphis's streets and arrest any citizen threatening the civil order. In some cases, black soldiers even arrested white city policemen. Facing the specter of a race riot, Harris may have chosen not to sanction black prostitution to avoid exacerbating racial tensions.³⁵

Yet, even as it was the public nature of prostitution that turned it into an issue among Memphis residents, the government intended to manage the public women as privately as possible.³⁶ On September 30, 1864, the city Medical Inspection Department issued a confidential circular initiating legalized prostitution. Although Nashville prostitutes could exhibit their licenses in public, the Memphis circular announced that the order was "intended for the information of women only, and must not be shown or given to men."

Harris's order declared that all prostitutes must register and receive weekly certificates whether they lived in boarding houses, in brothels, independently, or as kept mistresses. Kept women who did not live in boarding houses and who could "show that they are living privately with a responsible citizen of good character" were exempt from weekly medical inspections, although they did have to pay the regular \$2.50 examination fee. Curiously, while the circular forbade women from discussing the licensing system, it required prostitutes to register publicly at the city medical inspector's office directly above a popular confectionary store. Only those who could afford to pay an extra dollar per week would receive private examinations. The exam fees and the initial ten dollar licensing fee paid for "private female wards in the new City Hospital, on the corner of Exchange street and Front Row, into which registered women are admitted at any time for any disease upon showing their weekly certificate, [and] are afforded all the privacy and comfort of a home, and nursed by an experienced matron and female nurses, free from any cost or charge whatever."

In return for "free" medical care, the city got what it wanted--the restoration of Memphis's apparently respectable appearance. The mayor expressly forbade any "'street walking,' soliciting, stopping or talking with men on the streets; buggy or horseback riding for pleasure through the City in daylight; wearing a showy, flash[y] or immodest dress in public; any language or conduct in public which attracts attention; visiting the public squares, the New Memphis theatre, or other resort of LADIES." Even if they were not working, the law still forbade prostitutes to ride through town before dark, frequent the respectable theatre, or stroll across the public square. In order to receive legal protection, public women were forced to surrender their right to appear in public.³⁷

Under the new legalization scheme, Memphis officials registered 134 prostitutes. Prostitutes who failed to register were punished, as a "sprightly looking damsel" named Martin found out when the judge sentenced her to twenty days in the workhouse. By February 1865, the military had profited to the amount of \$3,893.49 from certificate and inspection fees. Channing Richards, Memphis's provisional mayor, suggested that the program's cost might be even lower if prostitutes were treated in a separate hospital instead of with other city patients in the municipal hospital. Presumably, Richards's ideal facility would have few of the niceties provided by Chambers in Nashville. Although the

provisional mayor condemned “any connection with such a department [as] extremely unpleasant,” he grudgingly conceded that “while it does not encourage vice it prevents to a considerable extent its worst consequences.”³⁸

Once legalization was in force and as prostitutes found their new place in the system, the courts seemed increasingly devoid of any titillating exploits. After a particularly long stretch of uninteresting court cases, a reporter complained, “Our city is becoming a model city, almost like a settlement of Quakers, so serene is everything and so passive is everybody”; there had only been an accident, a dog fight, and two or three “drunken fights.” Little had changed a few weeks later, and the reporter complained of ennui: “It is only occasionally that a case of any interest is brought up now-a-days.”³⁹

Regulation thus brought a measure of peace to Memphis, but it also brought disturbing complications that tested how far the authorities and the public were willing to go in their protection of commercial sexuality. In January 1865, a soldier left Maggie Montgomery’s bed without paying her for services rendered. Montgomery took him to court, claiming that “as much as houses of the stamp [brothels] kept by her are licensed by the city, it is the duty of the city to prevent and punish imposition on the keepers of said houses.” Although her primary suit failed, the assumption that her license entitled her sex business to legal protection marks an interesting departure from previous ways. Prostitutes had tried to use the legal system before but never so blatantly. Puss Pettus, for example, had accused her “boarder” of thievery in 1861 after overhearing the woman say that she was “\$350 ahead of the old cow.” Although the public knew Puss Pettus’s occupation full well, in court she still pretended to be a simple boarding house keeper. After legalization, madams and prostitutes no longer needed to dissemble.⁴⁰

Just as in Nashville, Memphis residents wrote to their newspapers after legalization complaining about prostitutes’ increasing incursions on public space. A typical letter complained that “the public conveyances here become [the prostitutes’] by right of conquest, so much so, that a lady fears to side through the streets for fear of being classed with them.” Moreover, by 1865 many Memphis prostitutes had, like those in Nashville, adopted some of the middle-class veneer, if only for their own purposes. These physical and behavioral transformations, along with the licensed prostitutes’ attempts to use the legal system, launched the issue of prostitution into the public sphere of newspapers and political discourse in Memphis and Nashville.⁴¹

CHAPTER IV “THE EXAMPLE OF THE OSTRICH”: PROSTITUTION IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE CIVIL WAR

Ultimately, most Tennesseans believed that the problems inherent in Nashville and Memphis’s legalization overweighed the benefits. The war ended in late spring of 1865, and both cities dismantled their prostitution programs and liquidated the prostitute fund within a matter of months. Some historians argue that this ending was inevitable because the troops’ departures shrank the sex market until there were too few prostitutes for the municipal governments to register. However, although the exodus did dramatically affect the prostitutes’ income and their clientele, it was not the only factor in the municipal governments’ decision to stop sanctioning prostitution. Even though officials were unwilling to acknowledge that civilians regularly sustained large numbers of sex workers, prostitution had flourished in each of the major Union-occupied cities before the war. Victory and a return to civil rule did not necessarily signify an end to prostitution, but authorities recognized community pressure to stop the prostitutes’ encroachments on the dominant public sphere. All these factors directly influenced the decision of Nashville and Memphis’s civic authorities to deregulate prostitution and let it disappear again into the shadows.

The troops’ exodus greatly diminished prostitutes’ income, and many women, especially sex workers who had moved to Nashville and Memphis during the war boom, followed the soldiers out of the city. In June 1865, the Memphis Ladies Relief Association reported that “a good many women” frequently asked the association to help send them away from the city. As the war ended, Dr. Chambers noted that “The prostitutes complain that they are not making much money now because of the scarcity of troops around the city . . . these women are rapidly leaving in all directions. Some profess to be going home, while others are looking out for situations where more money can be obtained wherewith to bedeck and bedizen themselves.” Some prostitutes also married out of the industry. Chambers recorded at least twelve sex workers who stopped registering after their marriage. Many urbanites welcomed the decrease in prostitutes’ visibility that accompanied the dwindling number of prostitutes.⁴²

Despite the manifest decrease, prostitutes did not completely disappear. Unless they married well, they still faced the same dilemma that reformer Caroline Dall had pointed out in 1860. In order to escape destitution, poor women basically had to “marry, stitch, die, or do worse.” Few urban leaders, however, would willingly admit the dearth of choices for poor women. Despite his distaste for its necessity, military surgeon Fletcher mourned as the legalization program faced extinction at the war’s end. He wrote to his superior, “After the attempt to reduce disease by the forcible expulsion of the prostitutes had, as it always has, utterly failed, the more philosophic plan of recognizing and controlling an ineradicable evil has met with undoubted success.” Fletcher acknowledged that prostitution never had been and never would be eradicated, but he believed that regulation could abate its worst consequences. Despite the

recommendations of such doctors and of other urban officials, however, postwar municipal governments chose a different path.⁴³

Just as Nashville and Memphis had relied on European legislation when devising their regulation orders during the war, postbellum officials patterned their reactions on British precedent. During legalization, doctors in both cities referenced their European colleagues' work. In 1864, the English Parliament had passed the Contagious Diseases Act, which required humiliating medical exams for any woman even suspected of being a prostitute in a naval or army town. The British government assumed that prostitution ordinances would be pointless in towns without a strong military presence. Similarly, municipal officials throughout the Union vainly hoped that political peace augured a social truce with prostitution and venereal disease. Although William Sanger published his tome shortly before the war, one doctor's words he quoted seem to echo Fletcher's observation: "the sentiment of the Anglo-Saxon race, whether wise or foolish, is strongly against the question of official supervision and control of this evil. In this we appear to follow the example of the ostrich, which remarkable bird is said to bury its head in the sand and, inasmuch as it sees nothing, believes that nothing sees it."⁴⁴

City officials hoped that lifting sex trade ordinances would permit blissful ignorance as prostitutes returned to the periphery of Americans' social consciousness. Nashville's experiment silently ended after Dr. Chambers submitted his resignation in May 1865, and Memphis's system ended equally quietly. Citizens of both towns then covertly asserted their control over public space again. By regulating prostitution, the military governments had helped to professionalize the sex trade and enabled prostitutes to form an apparently cohesive group of kept women, casual prostitutes, and streetwalkers. The registration of over six hundred prostitutes in Nashville and Memphis gave prostitutes a sudden visibility and alarmed many people who had previously overlooked the cities' "dens of immorality." Whether the danger was real or imagined, many citizens felt threatened by prostitutes' increasing presence.

In the postwar months, several newspapers in Nashville and Memphis eliminated or at least drastically reduced their coverage of prostitutes' misadventures. Instead of witty commentary, subscribers read simple lists of court cases: "J. Stack vs. W.F. Schuthiers" or "W.O. vs. Martha Burton." Some newspapers also reduced or even eliminated advertisements related to promiscuous sex. Although earlier issues of the Memphis Daily Bulletin had run frequent, large front-page ads for "private" doctors and cures, during the entire month of June 1865 it ran but one such advertisement for sarsaparilla syrup, in which "syphilis" was hidden in the middle of a long list of diseases that the syrup was alleged to heal. The Nashville Republican Banner followed the same pattern. Although 1861 issues had prominently advertised doctors who could cure "all diseases of the urinary and sexual organs" and literature such as the "Gentleman's Medical Companion and Private Adviser," such notices generally disappeared in the immediate postwar atmosphere. These advertisements were largely replaced by more socially acceptable ads.⁴⁵

Despite newspapers' attempts to remove prostitution as a public issue, many articles emphasized black men's and women's sexual misdeeds as cities tried to come to terms with emancipation. Newspapers that listed court cases only by genderless initials still made sure to specify black litigants' race. When John Kerley (white) was arrested for

beating a black prostitute with a bed slat, the Nashville press accused the victim of allowing the beating. Instead of criticizing Kerley, the paper declared that “Notorious negro bawdy houses proprietors must be severely punished in all cases, and the disgraceful scenes enacted about such quarters [must] not be tolerated!”⁴⁶

Most postwar newspaper accounts of prostitution revolved around the misadventures of blacks like Martha Tidwell, “a walnut complexioned sylph who was found by the police revenue cutters sailing in suspicious waters unprovided with ‘letters of marque’. The guard arrested her for street-walking.” Another black woman was arrested for doing the “heavy business of Criddle Street.” When the day provided few scintillating tidbits of black misconduct, reporters often resorted to generalizations such as “Verily, darkies are as thick before the daily city Tribunal as ‘leaves in Valambross[a].’”⁴⁷

Despite editorialists’ focus on African-American sexual crime, white prostitutes still occasionally appeared in the columns, especially if they were charged with assault or if they seemed especially depraved. Melinda Thompson of Nashville was one such sex worker whose legal woes seemed newsworthy. Although she was charged with assault, the reporter identified her as “one of the fallen angels who flutter and hobble about on damaged pinions in the precincts of the Gay [Street]” and stated that a “disconsolate Lothario” paid her fine. Another issue of the same newspaper moralized about the fate of Mary Smith, a pock-marked prostitute who had forced her sixteen-year-old daughter “to live in paramours with her own brother.” The reporter commented that no matter what nostrum Smith used to erase the years and diseases that consumed her body, “it wouldn’t wash out the dark blight of a daughter, Nor loss of a soul.” The court, however, apparently did not interfere to save the daughter and only fined the mother ten dollars. Evidently, officials did not want to become too involved with the underworld of prostitution.⁴⁸

News of the remarkable experiments regarding prostitution during the latter half of the war in Nashville and Memphis did not circulate widely. This is somewhat surprising in a nation where newspapers typically recycled news and editorials from distant newspapers and where a single order from General Benjamin F. Butler in Louisiana could ignite an international uproar over the treatment of New Orleans women in May 1862. Nonetheless, few people outside Tennessee seemed to know of the Nashville and Memphis experience. When a newspaper editor in Macon, Georgia, discussed the possibility of legalizing prostitution there in August 1865, he seemed to believe that the experiment would be the first of its kind in the United States. Instead of citing Tennessee’s success he argued that “In France, and other parts of Europe, the restrictions of legislation thrown around prostitution, have been attended with happy effects; and its present awful consequences, here, can be mitigated and materially lessened by prompt and wise legislation.” No doubt the rapid deregulation in Nashville and Memphis after the war was a factor here. If legalized prostitution had continued, the two cities’ authorization of prostitution would certainly have attracted national attention eventually. Deregulation helped ensure that Nashville’s and Memphis’s brief sanctioning of public women entering the dominant public sphere would remain relatively unknown.⁴⁹

Other attempts at legalization occurred in the immediate aftermath of the war. On April 24, 1865, Colonel William T. Bennett, provost marshal of Charleston, South Carolina, apparently set up a system of regulation, appointing an “Inspector of Public Women with a view of finding if they are free of contagious venereal disease.” The city’s courts had long struggled with women who, according to one newspaper, “to the very great annoyance of the neighborhood” prostituted themselves to “lewd men of little respectability.” The arrival in Charleston of Union soldiers late in the war with plenty of money only encouraged the sex trade. Bennett’s action seems to have sparked very little public discussion, however, and the names of registered prostitutes, the duration of the program, and virtually every other detail of the operation have been lost.⁵⁰

Several years after the war, other cities also tried regulation. St. Paul, Minnesota, regulated prostitution between 1870 and 1883, but the system gave few health benefits to registered participants. Instead, regulation largely protected customers against robbery and assault in brothels. St. Louis, Missouri, also legalized prostitution in 1870, but the experiment was short-lived. St. Louis’s prostitutes received regular medical inspections until American feminists and moral reformers succeeded in getting the ordinance abolished. In 1878, local officials approved a red-light district for Virginia City, Nevada; it was finally shut down during World War II, “upon request from the Federal Security Agency to protect military personnel in the area.” Despite the similar time frames, citizens of these cities rarely, if ever, discussed each others’ attempts at regulation.⁵¹

Just as in Nashville and Memphis, regulating prostitution in St. Paul, St. Louis, and Virginia City worked better than trying to eliminate it. Officials in all five cities found that a legalized sex trade reduced disease and crime. Eventually, however, citizens complained that prostitutes had become too visible, and taxpayers refused to sanction double standards or the turning of prostitutes into “state slaves.”⁵²

This thesis raises many questions for future study. The newspapers, correspondence, and military records cited herein represent only a portion of the cultural dialogue over public space, gender, race, and sexuality in the occupied South. More research on wartime Charleston, Washington, Norfolk, and New Orleans would shed further light on issues of public space, prostitution, and race in those cities. A broader sampling of sources on Nashville and Memphis might expose other dimensions of the prostitution issue there. Records of churches and local charities, for example, might reveal concerns not evident in other documents.

During the Civil War, authorities in Union-occupied posts wrestled with problems arising from the sex trade while prostitutes increasingly entered respectable public space through their associations with Union soldiers, their newfound sense of community, and, occasionally, beneficial legislation. Although the wartime experience with the sex trade did not foreshadow an immediate sexual revolution, the legalization experiments in Tennessee and the struggles over prostitution in other Union-occupied cities allowed discourse over gender and sexuality into the dominant public sphere and provided a striking illustration of the merger of home front and battle front.

LIST OF REFERENCES

LIST OF REFERENCES

Chapter One

- ¹ Henry Schelling to Friend William, 13 November 1863, William F. Herzog Papers, Chicago History Museum.
- ² Historians have commonly agreed with contemporaries about the surge in wartime prostitution despite the lack of supporting evidence. No dependable estimate of the number of prostitutes exists for the antebellum or postbellum years since reformers and clerics routinely inflated prostitution statistics while police reports grossly underestimated them. Court records actually suggest a decline in prostitution during the war but only because the police were preoccupied with more pressing military concerns. Timothy J. Gilfoyle, City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920 (New York, 1992), 57.
- ³ Jurgen Habermas, "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere," in Habermas and the Public Sphere, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, 1992), 427; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America (New York, 1985).
- ⁴ George C. Rable, Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism (Urbana, 1989); Drew Gilpin Faust, Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War (Chapel Hill, 1996); LeeAnn Whites, The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender: Augusta, Georgia, 1860-1890 (Athens, 1995); Estelle B. Freedman and John D'Emilio, Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America (New York, 1988); Gilfoyle, City of Eros.
- ⁵ Anne M. Butler, Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West, 1865-90 (Chicago, 1985); Thomas P. Lowry, The Story the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell: Sex in the Civil War (Mechanicsburg, 1994); Catherine Clinton, "Public Women and Sexual Politics," in Battle Scars: Gender and Sexuality in the American Civil War, ed. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (Oxford, 2006); Freedman and D'Emilio, Intimate Matters; Gilfoyle, City of Eros.
- ⁶ Memphis Avalanche, 25 June 1862; Free Loveyer, Directory to the Seraglios in New York, Philadelphia, and all the Principal Cities in the Union (New York, 1859); Alecia Long, The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865-1920 (Baton Rouge, 2004).
- ⁷ Memoir of Benton E. Dubb, Civil War Collection, Folder 12, Box F23, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee; Gilfoyle, City of Eros, 18; Memphis Daily Appeal, 26 April 1863.
- ⁸ Darla Brock, "Battles of Their Own: Memphis's Civil War Women" (M.A. thesis, Memphis State University, 1994), 64; Memphis Daily Appeal, 16 January 1864; Thomas A. Crist, "Babies in Privy: Prostitution, Infanticide, and Abortion in New York City's Five Points District," Historical Archeology 39 (2005): 19-46.
- ⁹ Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Second Ward, Davidson County, Tennessee, 38-39, 60-61. A census taker for Washington, D.C., may have also identified prostitutes using the term "substitute" to indicate their profession. Elizabeth Barthold O'Brien, "Illicit Congress in the Nation's Capital," Historical Archeology 39 (2005), 47. It is unclear if the boys were chore boys or prostitutes; George Chauncey persuasively argues that male prostitution enjoyed a significant trade in antebellum New York, and

other cities may have been no exception. George Chauncey, Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940 (New York, 1994).

¹⁰ Carolyn Dall, Women's Right to Labor (Boston, 1860), 17; Memphis Bulletin, 24 March 1863; Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Second Ward, Davidson County, Tennessee, 63.

¹¹ Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Second Ward, Davidson County, Tennessee, 43, 40, 62, 63.

¹² William Acton, Prostitution, Considered in Its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects in London and Other Large Cities and Garrison Towns, with Proposals for the Control and Prevention of Its Attendant Evils (London, 1857), 29; William Sanger, The History of Prostitution (New York, 1848); Dall, Women's Right to Labor, x; Butler, Daughters of Joy, xvii. Kept women may not have considered themselves prostitutes because they did not charge specific rates or regularly change sexual partners.

¹³ Christine Stansell, City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1780-1860 (New York, 1986), 118; Gilfoyle, City of Eros; Kathy Peiss, Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York (Philadelphia, 1986), 109-11.

¹⁴ Sanger, History of Prostitution, 19; James B. Jones Jr., "Municipal Vice: The Management of Prostitution in Tennessee's Urban Experience. Part 1: The Experience of Nashville and Memphis, 1854-1917," Tennessee Historical Quarterly 50 (1991): 33; Nashville Republican Banner, 8 November 1861.

¹⁵ Memphis Argus, 21 March 1861; Nashville Republican Banner, 30 October, 3 November 1861.

¹⁶ Charles Smart, ed., The Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion, Part III, vol. II, Medical Volume (District of Columbia, 1888), 13; Jones "Municipal Vice," 33; Bell Irvin Wiley, The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union (New York, 1952); Bell Irvin Wiley, The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy (New York, 1943). To put this into perspective, 13.78 white soldiers per thousand (1.4 percent) contracted scurvy and yet the death rate from scurvy was .16 deaths per thousand, more than double that of venereal diseases. Black soldiers, although less likely to contract venereal diseases, had a death rate from it nearly triple that of white soldiers. The numbers of infected soldiers reflect only the official statistics given to the government after the war. Given the bureaucratic inefficiency of that era, it seems likely even more soldiers were diagnosed with venereal disease.

¹⁷ Smart, Medical and Surgical History, 892; Nashville Republican Banner, 30 October 1861.

¹⁸ Clinton, "Public Women and Sexual Politics," 22; Kenneth Todar, "The Pathogenic Neisseriae," <http://textbookofbacteriology.net/neisseria.html> (accessed 23 September 2006); Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Syphilis – CDC Fact Sheet," <http://www.cdc.gov/std/Syphilis/STDFact-Syphilis.htm> (accessed 23 September 2006); Allan Brandt, No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States since 1880 (New York, 1985). John Hunter, a London surgeon and anatomist, even applied the pus from a gonorrhea patient to his own penis in order to prove that syphilis developed from gonorrhea. The debate

did not conclude until 1879 when Albert Ludwig Sigismund Neisser identified the gonorrhoea bacterium. Syphilis would not be identified until 1905.

¹⁹ Janet Farrell Brodie, Contraception and Abortion in Nineteenth-Century America (Cornell, 1997); Smart, Medical and Surgical History, 892.

²⁰ Sanger, History of Prostitution, 663; Pittsfield Sun, 26 November 1863; Thomas P. Lowry, "The Army's Licensed Prostitutes," Civil War Times Illustrated 52 (2002): 31.

²¹ Stansell, City of Women, 118; Peiss, Cheap Amusements, 109-11; Gilfoyle, City of Eros; Nashville Republican Banner, 30 November 1861; Philadelphia Inquirer, 12 January 1864.

²² Memphis Daily Bulletin, 3, 25 January 1865; Macon Telegraph, 27 March 1865; Carolyn H. Dall, The College, the Market, and the Court (Boston, 1860), 15; Peggy Pascoe, Relations of Rescue: The Search for Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939 (Oxford, 1993); Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Fourth Ward, Davidson County, Tennessee, 117. The concept of innate womanly values such as piety, purity, domesticity, and obedience was largely an Anglo, middle-class, Protestant ideal. Christine Stansell shows how some working-class women used sex as a "way of receiving presents from their gentlemen admirers," even though they did not consider themselves prostitutes. Stansell, City of Women, 118.

²³ Acton, Prostitution, 165, 162; Sanger, History of Prostitution.

²⁴ Memphis Daily Appeal, 7, 13 April 1863, 30 January 1864, 3 January 1865; Memphis Daily Bulletin, 3 January 1865.

Chapter Two

¹ Pittsfield Sun, 19 September 1861; O'Brien, "Illicit Congress," 51.

² O'Brien, "Illicit Congress," 48, 52. The "upper-ten" usually referred to houses where society men and women made secret assignations.

³ Ibid. 47- 51.

⁴ Ibid., 51.

⁵ Ibid.; Lowry, Story the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell, 32.

⁶ Lowry, Story the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell, 67-68; Pittsfield Sun, 26 November 1863.

⁷ Gilfoyle, City of Eros.

⁸ Macon Telegraph, 20 August 1865.

⁹ Memphis Daily Appeal, 9 March 1864; Joseph T. Glatthar, The March to the Sea and Beyond: Sherman's Troops in the Savannah and Carolinas Campaigns (New York, 1985), 93. As with most contemporary articles, the writer skims over another, more sinister, ramification--that of soldiers passing disease on to their wives. As officials in Washington and elsewhere realized, prosecuting prostitutes but not clients did little to control venereal disease.

¹⁰ Norman A. Eliason, Tarheel Talk: A Historical Study of the English Language in North Carolina to 1860 (Chapel Hill, 1956); Wiley, Life of Billy Yank, 258; Miscellaneous Lists Relating to the Provost Court of Norfolk, Virginia, 1863 -1865, File 1697, Record Group 393, National Archives, Washington.

¹¹ Miscellaneous Lists Relating to the Provost Court of Norfolk.

¹² Ibid. One historian has posited that serving any prison sentence gave women little reason to leave prostitution since jail time often resembled brothel life. Barbara Meil

Hobson, Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition (New York, 1987).

¹³ Richard Tansey, "Prostitution and Politics in Antebellum New Orleans," Southern Studies 18 (1979): 449.

¹⁴ Richmond Enquirer, 3 February 1865.

¹⁵ Smart, Medical and Surgical History, 892; Tansey, "Prostitution and Politics," 457.

Chapter Three

¹ Smart, Medical and Surgical History, 892.

² *Ibid.*; Nashville Dispatch, 8 July 1863.

³ Wiley, Life of Billy Yank, 26; Smart, Medical and Surgical History, 895; Nashville Republican Banner, 9 November 1861; Nashville Daily Press, 9, 15 July 1863; Nashville Dispatch, 8, 10 July 1863.

⁴ Records of the State Historian, Folder 19, Box 23, Record Group 29, Tennessee State Library and Archives; Nashville Dispatch, 8 July 1863.

⁵ Catherine Clinton, Public Women and the Confederacy (Milwaukee, 1999), 26; Nashville Dispatch, 9 July 1863; Nashville Daily Press, 9 July 1863.

⁶ Records of the State Historian; Ephraim A. Wilson, Memoirs of the War (Cleveland, 1893), 151-53; Nashville Dispatch, 26 July 1863; "William Chambers," Medical Officers and Physicians, File E561, Box 105, Record Group 94, National Archives. The few that disembarked were immediately jailed and then sent back to Nashville.

⁷ Smart, Medical and Surgical History, 893; Records of the State Historian; Nashville Dispatch, 5 August 1863; Frederick Way, Way's Packet Directory 1843-1983 (Athens, 1984), 221.

⁸ Smart, Medical and Surgical History, 895.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 893.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 894.

¹¹ Register of Letters Received by Provost Marshal December 1863-September 1865, Volume 177, File E1656, Record Group 393, National Archives. This is the only evidence remaining that Spalding accepted rebel currency. Although the provost marshal may have done so in order to remove enemy money from circulation, Comstock may also have been mistaken.

¹² Clinton, Public Women and the Confederacy, 26-28; Henry Schelling to Friend William, 21 November 1863, Herzog Papers; Memphis Daily Bulletin, 22 March 1864; 24 June 1863, File 187, Record Group 153, National Archives. Evidently, neither Nashville nor Memphis had a significant number of non-white prostitutes. Although Martha Hodes specifically discusses white women and black men, her conclusion about the spirit of toleration toward interracial sex applies to black women and white men as well. Interracial sex was often treated with toleration, which she defines as "a measure of forbearance for that which is not approved," as opposed to tolerance which freely allows alternative opinions. Martha Hodes, White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South (New Haven, 1997), 3.

¹³ William M. Chambers, "Sanitary Report of the Condition of the Prostitutes of Nashville, Tennessee," William P. Palmer Papers, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio; Lowry, Sex in the Civil War, 80, 81; Smart, Medical and Surgical

History, 894. The hospital was not the typical “prison hospital,” where prostitutes were usually imprisoned for extended periods of time. Most Nashville women diagnosed with gonorrhea stayed an average of ten days, those with primary syphilis eleven days, and those with secondary syphilis thirty-eight days. Only two women died while in the hospital, one from smallpox and one from tuberculosis. At least ten registered prostitutes died away from the hospitals.

¹⁴ Register of Letters Received by Provost Marshal December 1863-September 1865.

¹⁵ R. Wallace, “United States Hospitals at Nashville,” Cincinnati Lancet & Observer, ns 7 (1864): 587, quoted in Lowry, Story the Soldiers Wouldn’t Tell, 78-83; Smart, Medical and Surgical History, 894-96.

¹⁶ Chambers, “Sanitary Report”; Sanger, History of Prostitution, 693.

¹⁷ Smart, Medical and Surgical History, 894; Chambers, “Sanitary Report.”

¹⁸ Chambers, “Sanitary Report.”

¹⁹ *Ibid.*; Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Davidson County, Tennessee; Nashville Republican Banner, 6 November 1861.

²⁰ The brothel system helped the provost marshal track all incoming prostitutes to enforce health standards; any madam who failed to report a new inmate faced prison time.

Chambers, “Sanitary Report”; Patricia Cline Cohen, The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York (New York, 1998).

²¹ John Watkins to Wife, 14 December 1864, John Watkins Collection, Special Collections, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee.

²² *Ibid.*; LeRoy P. Graf, Ralph W. Haskins, et al., eds., Papers of Andrew Johnson, 16 vols. (Knoxville, 1997), 6: 352-53; Nashville Dispatch, 4, 5 September 1863.

²³ Memphis Bulletin, 12 August 1863.

²⁴ Patrick H. Garrow, et al., “Living Near Beale Street in Postbellum Memphis: Data Recovery at 40SY611, Shelby County, Tennessee,” Archaeology Report submitted to Gibson Guitar Corporation (May 2001), in possession of TRC Garrow Associates, Inc. 3772 Pleasantdale Road, Suite 200, Atlanta, Georgia, 30340, Copy in author’s possession, 17, 10, 11.

²⁵ Brock, “Battles of Their Own,” 61-62; Memphis Avalanche, 2 August, 26 June 1861.

²⁶ Memphis Bulletin, 8 August 1862; Memphis Argus, 23 March 1861, Garrow, “Living Near Beale Street,” 16.

²⁷ George Hovey Cadman to Esther Cooper Cadman, 18 May 1863, George Hovey Cadman Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

²⁸ Wiley, Life of Billy Yank, 261; Memphis Avalanche, 14, 21, 23, 25 June 1862; Memphis Bulletin, 26 July 1862, 30 April 1863.

²⁹ Memphis Bulletin, 1 May 1863.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 30 April, 1 May, 13 March 1863.

³¹ Memphis Daily Bulletin, 20 January 1864; New Hampshire Sentinel, 14 May 1863.

³² *Ibid.*, 9 July 1863.

³³ Smart, Medical and Surgical History, 895.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 5 April 1864.

³⁵ Ibid., 896; Garrow, “Living Near Beale Street,” 7-8. Ultimately, the racial tension culminated in a race riot in May 1866 that killed two whites and about forty-six blacks. The riot began from a dray incident on Beale and South Streets, a poor and prostitution-ridden area.

³⁶ Memphis Bulletin, 28, 30 July 1864; Smart, Medical and Surgical History, 895.

³⁷ Smart, Medical and Surgical History, 895.

³⁸ Ibid., 896; Memphis Daily Bulletin, 3 January 1865.

³⁹ Memphis Daily Appeal 8, 9 March, 9, 25 January, 1865. The court had experienced temporary lulls before, but this is the first of noticeable duration.

⁴⁰ Memphis Bulletin, 18 January 1865; Memphis Avalanche, 24, 27 September 1861.

⁴¹ Jurgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society (Cambridge, 1991); Stansell, City of Women, passim; Lowry, “Army’s Licensed Prostitutes,” 30; Memphis Bulletin, 30 April 1863.

Chapter Four

⁴² Memphis Daily Bulletin, 20 June 1865; Chambers, “Sanitary Report.”

⁴³ Dall, Women’s Right to Labor, 104; Smart, Medical and Surgical History, 893.

⁴⁴ Sanger, History of Prostitution, 692.

⁴⁵ Memphis Daily Bulletin, 29 June 1865; Nashville Republican Banner, 22 June 1865.

⁴⁶ Memphis Daily Bulletin 13, 15 June 1866; Nashville Republican Banner, 27 September 1865.

⁴⁷ Nashville Republican Banner, 28 September, 10 October, 5 November 1865. In part, this association between African Americans and lewd conduct occurred because many newly-freed African Americans settled in the low-rent districts where crime and prostitution thrived. For example, in Memphis, Beale and Gayoso streets continued to serve as a center for prostitution, gambling, and alcohol even as they became the center of an African-American community with churches, schools, parks, and civic and social organizations in ensuing decades.

⁴⁸ Nashville Republican Banner, 6 October, 5 November 1865.

⁴⁹ Macon Telegraph, 20 August 1865.

⁵⁰ Lowry, “Army’s Licensed Prostitutes,” 31.

⁵¹ Richard Symanski, “Prostitution in Nevada,” Annals of the Association of American Geographers 64 (1974): 358; Joel Best, Controlling Vice: Regulating Brothel Prostitution in St. Paul, 1865-1883 (Columbus, 1998).

⁵² Symanski, “Prostitution in Nevada”; Best, Controlling Vice; Judith R. Walkowitz, “The Politics of Prostitution,” Signs, 6 (1980): 123-35.

VITA

Danielle Jeannine Cole was born in Hackettstown, New Jersey. She graduated from Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, in 2003 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in History and Creative Writing. After teaching in North Carolina and South Korea, she began studying history at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She graduated with a Master of Arts degree in May 2007.