

Introduction

In 1846, Baltimore entrepreneur Johns Hopkins opened a “splendid” set of commercial buildings on the corner of Lombard and Gay Streets, just north of the Patapsco River.¹ Hopkins, who made his fortune first as a country merchant and then as an investor in the railroad, intended the buildings to facilitate the trade that was central to both Baltimore’s economy and his personal wealth. The buildings were practical, but they were also a symbol of the city’s commercial pretensions. In addition to offices and commodious warehouses where merchants and dry goods dealers could keep the variety of products they imported from the countryside and exported through the port of Baltimore, Hopkins funded the construction of a beautifully designed corner hall. The three-story structure, described as one of the “handsomest buildings in the city,” was adorned with numerous ornaments, including a trident of Neptune and a Roman spade that symbolized Baltimore’s links to maritime commerce and agriculture.²

Local newspapers deemed the building “a fine improvement to the neighborhood, both in commercial and architectural points of view,” and it became popular with city dwellers and visitors alike.³ Its upper floors housed a ballroom and meeting rooms where local political clubs, militia groups, and business organizations convened. The space in front of the building occasionally hosted women from local churches, holding

¹ “Local Matters,” *Baltimore Sun* (hereafter *Sun*), Feb. 12, 1846.

² “Local Matters,” *Sun*, Mar. 7, 1846. ³ “Local Matters,” *Sun*, Feb. 12, 1846.

Christmas bazaars or other fundraisers.⁴ In the Corner Hall's basement was the Parisian Restaurant, which served as a "refectory" where businessmen could network and negotiate and where wealthy visitors and locals could go for fine dining. Within a few years, however, the restaurant also became a refectory for guests of another sort. Under the tutelage of its keepers, Alonzo Welsh and Susan Creamer, the Parisian Restaurant developed a reputation as a "bawdy house" and "supper club" for sex workers, who traveled from nearby brothels to drink, mingle, and solicit with other patrons and each other.⁵

For those unfamiliar with nineteenth-century history, the notion of sex workers inhabiting the same space as some of the city's most affluent businessmen and merchants – the kind of men for whom city streets and institutions are named – is, no doubt, a strange one. Americans are accustomed to thinking of prostitution as a marginal industry, one confined to the metaphorical shadows of urban "skid rows." Many nineteenth-century observers would have liked that to be the case in their own cities. However, for much of the long nineteenth century, prostitution was a visible form of commerce whose presence in urban America was difficult to ignore. By the 1890s, Baltimore had a thriving street prostitution trade and nearly 300 brothels and bawdy houses.⁶ Hundreds of women lived and worked in these establishments, and dozens of proprietors from around the city – including Alonzo Welsh and Susan Creamer – profited directly or indirectly from their sexual labor.⁷ Baltimore was not unusual in this respect. By some estimates, commercial sex was the second most profitable industry – behind only the garment trade – in cities like New York by the 1850s.⁸ All told, thousands of women sold sex to make a living or to make ends meet, and they tended to cluster around hubs of mobility and sites of commerce.

⁴ "Second Street Church Fair," *Sun*, Dec. 21, 1849; "Sharpshooters' Ball," *Sun*, Nov. 24, 1846.

⁵ "Local Matters," *Sun*, Nov. 20, 1852; "Local Matters," *Sun*, Nov. 22, 1852.

⁶ Joseph Waddell Clokey, *Dying at the Top: Or, the Moral and Spiritual Condition of the Young Men of America* (Chicago: W. W. Varnarsdale, 1890), 90. The Baltimore City Criminal Court saw 280 indictments for bawdy house charges in 1880 (BCCC 1880, MSA C-1849-45).

⁷ BCCC (Docket) (hereafter BCCC), May 1855, Case 770, Alonzo Welsh; BCCC, January Term, 1859, Case 506, Alonzo Welsh; BCCC, Case 444, Susan Creamer, September Term, 1855.

⁸ Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York: Norton, 1992), 124-25.

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The existence of a sex establishment in the actual basement of a center of urban trade and commerce was somewhat unusual, but it was also apropos. Prostitution as it developed in Baltimore in the early years of the nineteenth century was intimately connected to the rise of the market economy. It emerged as a visible trade in maritime neighborhoods during the city's early commercial boom period, and it expanded dramatically as a result of many of the same factors that necessitated the construction of the Commercial Buildings. Chief among these were the increased mobility of people and goods and the expansion of cash markets. In the midst of urban growth and capitalist development, disruptions to older models of household economy and changing notions of women's role in the labor market gave rise to new cultures of urban sexual commerce. The period in which the Commercial Buildings were erected to signal Baltimore's commercial aspirations and maturation as a city was a period that saw the emergence of dozens of brothels and bawdy houses in their vicinity. Highly commercialized, organized in their labor arrangements, and often lucrative, brothels were a visible part of Baltimore's sexual landscapes from their emergence in the 1820s until their decline and eventual closure in the twentieth century. It was women from these houses who patronized the Parisian Restaurant, exposing, as they did so, the connections between the worlds of licit and illicit commerce, of commodified goods and commodified sexual labor.

This book traces the evolution of the sex trade as it developed in Baltimore over the course of the long nineteenth century. In doing so, it contributes to the large body of historical scholarship that argues that sexuality "was not an unchanging biological reality or a universal, natural force, but was, rather, a product of political, social, economic, and cultural processes."⁹ In Baltimore, as in other American cities, commercial sex grew out of the early capitalist economy's dislocations and unequal division of resources between men and women. The sex trade's labor practices, spatial arrangements, and even sexual offerings shifted in accordance with broader changes in the nature of commerce, urban development, and policing. Tracing shifts in the sex trade provides a window into the ways in which the worlds of sexuality remained intertwined with economy even as Americans at the mid-century increasingly embraced the notion that sex, family, and the realm of intimacy should be

⁹ Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons, "Passion and Power: An Introduction," in *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*, ed. Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons with Robert A. Padgug (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 3.

separated from the cash nexus.¹⁰ It also allows historians to examine the role of the state – broadly construed to include the networks of local officials, courts, and public charities – in shaping the illicit sexual economy.

While *Bawdy City* gives attention to diverse forms of sexual exchange, much of its narrative is structured around the rise and fall of brothel prostitution. Brothels had a relatively brief heyday as a means of organizing sexual commerce in Baltimore and, indeed, in most American cities. Brothels were uncommon in the colonial and Revolutionary eras, when most sexual commerce remained loosely organized and largely street-based. Historian Clare Lyons found that Philadelphia, one of the most established American colonial ports, developed a boisterous and highly public sex trade that included brothels only in the latter years of the eighteenth century.¹¹ Historians of New York and Boston found that small sex trades emerged in those cities after the American Revolution but did not extend much outside marginal and segregated sailors' establishments until the 1830s, when organized and highly commercialized sex establishments began to develop.¹² Such was the case in Baltimore. It would take until the 1830s for the city to develop specialized sex establishments that required women to board-in, to work under the supervision of a madam (who in some cases was under the supervision of a landlord), and to sell sex on a somewhat professional basis. By the Civil War period, however, brothels would be both a common model of organizing sex work and the model that drew the most sustained attention from the press and connoisseurs of the urban sex trade. Their prominence, which was reinforced in the middle decades of the nineteenth century by courts that were hostile to public forms of prostitution but largely tolerant of contained ones, began to fade by the turn of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, brothels survived in large numbers until their forcible closure at the hands of the Baltimore police in 1915.

¹⁰ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985); Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chapter 6.

¹¹ Clare A. Lyons, *Sex among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730–1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 277–78.

¹² Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*; Barbara Meil Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

Brothels were not the only models of sexual commerce in Baltimore over the course of the long nineteenth century, but their prominence, their visibility in the historical record, and their very boundedness as a historical form makes them a fruitful topic of study. Tracing their trajectory provides a window into the ways in which the growth of the market economy, the rise of industry, and the emergence of new legal discourses concerning rights created new sexual cultures in the city and affected the lives of marginalized women. In a similar vein, analyzing the ways in which the state and local reformers responded to brothels' presence over time can tell historians much about the politics of urban life during a period marked by sharp transition from a nascent commercial economy to an industrial one. Because brothels were such a visible part of the urban world, they became a site at which Baltimoreans developed their notions of property rights, expressed ideas about gender and women's roles in society, reinforced racial divides, and critiqued everything from urban machine politics to the labor practices of industrial capitalism.

One of the great values of Baltimore as a case study in the history of commercial sex – beyond its status as one of the largest US cities in the nineteenth century – is that it was, as Barbara Fields deemed it, “a middle ground” between the South and the North, the slave states and the free.¹³ Both before and after the Civil War, the city had one of the largest free black populations of any urban area in the country as a result of migration from Maryland's tobacco regions and other areas of the South. Black women participated in Baltimore's sex trade in various capacities, especially in the latter decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth. Although scholars like Cynthia Blair, Emily Epstein Landau, Alecia P. Long, and Kevin Mumford have written excellent works that engage with black women's role in the sex trade and with the racial dimensions of sexual commerce, race remains an underdeveloped theme in many histories of prostitution. Historians know especially little about it in urban centers outside “the Great Southern Babylon” of

¹³ Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). On free black communities in Baltimore, see Christopher Phillips, *Freedom's Port: The African American Community of Baltimore, 1790–1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Ralph Clayton, *Black Baltimore, 1820–1870* (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 1987); Jennifer Hull Dorsey, *Hirelings: African American Workers and Free Labor in Early Maryland* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

New Orleans or the historically free cities of New York and Chicago.¹⁴ Baltimore, therefore, provides an opportunity to study the ways that the politics of prostitution and its spatial relations intersected locally with the politics of race, both before and after emancipation. The Civil War, emancipation, and subsequent struggles to redefine black Marylanders' relationship to the state changed contemporary understandings of rights and state power in ways that led to increased state efforts to contain prostitution and prevent its encroachment on middle-class neighborhoods. In turn, the subsequent pushing of brothels into poor neighborhoods that quickly became havens for displaced black urbanites functioned to justify racial segregation and reinforce notions of black criminality in the eyes of white authorities.

Commercial sex's role in legitimizing the segregation and subordination of black Baltimoreans was just one way among many in which the sex trade changed Baltimore's social geographies and regulatory structures over the course of the long nineteenth century. As prostitution boomed in Baltimore, local officials and courts struggled to find ways to handle the trade. Urban prostitution was simultaneously an illicit economy, a breach of public order and prevailing gender hierarchies, and a threat to the city's reputation and property values. The city's various efforts to criminalize, regulate, and control it were rooted in everyday citizens' and local and state authorities' (sometimes competing) visions of urban order.¹⁵ Studying them reveals much about the evolution of city building and the development of the state over the course of crucial decades in American political and legal history and, more significantly, positions women as important historical actors in that process.

¹⁴ Cynthia M. Blair, *I've Got to Make My Livin': Black Women's Sex Work in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Emily Epstein Landau, *Spectacular Wickedness: Sex, Race, and Memory in Storyville, New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013); Alecia P. Long, *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865–1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005); Kevin Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

¹⁵ My thinking on the relationship between sexuality policing and urban geography has been shaped by numerous scholars, especially geographers Philip Howell (Howell, *Geographies of Regulation: Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Britain and the Empire* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009]) and Phil Hubbard (Hubbard, *Sex and the City: Geographies of Prostitution in the Urban West* [Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 1999], 60–99).

Bawdy City approaches prostitution from the perspectives of social, labor, and legal history. The first section of the book traces the transformation of the sex trade from the 1790s to the eve of the Civil War. Chapters 1 and 2 analyze prostitution's transition in the first decades of the nineteenth century from a largely informal, subsistence trade to one that was organized and specialized in ways that reflected the broader specialization of urban businesses during that time. In the earliest years of the city's development, the sex trade was centered around East Baltimore's waterways that brought maritime trade and sailors into the city. Women of various ages, races, and marital arrangements used sex work as part of an economy of makeshifts, soliciting in taverns and on the wharves and, in most cases, barely scraping by on their earnings. However, increased urban migration and the intensification of gendered divisions of labor in the 1820s and 1830s created both a supply and a demand for sexual labor outside maritime neighborhoods. The sex trade expanded and developed new commercial forms, including brothels in which women boarded-in and worked more or less professionally at sex work. In West Baltimore, first- and second-class houses clustered around the expanded commercial district and catered to white-collar workers, local elites, and well-off artisans. These houses, which were designed to be spaces of sociability that resembled bourgeois homes in their decor and overall characters, were exclusionary when it came to their boarding practices. Older women, married women, and black women were not allowed to labor in the establishments except as domestics. The young, white women who were employed in brothels sacrificed some of their independence, but their reward for doing so was their ability to earn more money by servicing a more affluent clientele. By the 1840s, many brothel workers had moved beyond mere subsistence and, in some cases, gained upward mobility in a society where women's sexual labor was virtually the only type that was valued in the marketplace.¹⁶

The rise of brothels led to the increased segregation of a trade that had once been well integrated into the mixed commercial spaces of maritime neighborhoods. At the same time, it also embedded sex work even more deeply into the urban economy because of the investment in property, furnishings, and fantasy-fulfillment required to create a successful parlor house or "genteel" sex establishment. Chapter 3 examines the networks of landlords, liquor dealers, publishers, and "legitimate" business owners

¹⁶ On ideologies surrounding women's labor in the nineteenth century, see, among many others, Boydston, *Home and Work*.

who profited either directly from the sex trade or indirectly from the large amounts of cash that flowed through it. In Baltimore, as in New York and other cities, investing in the sex trade became an economic strategy for both wealthy and middling dabblers in real estate. As prostitution expanded into a large urban industry, brothels created demand for labor, goods, and services in their neighborhoods, and madams pumped money into local circulation. Although women were increasingly defined in nineteenth-century America as non-producing dependents, their labor as sex workers and the commercialized fantasies they created around prostitution contributed in important ways to the urban economy.

Part II focuses on how the courts, local authorities, and city residents responded to the growth of the sex trade and the rise of brothels and attempted to regulate commercial sex. Chapter 4 traces the local, legal history of prostitution throughout the antebellum decades. During that period, Baltimore's courts responded to the expansion of the sex trade in ways that were in keeping with long-standing common law traditions that defined prostitution as an offense against the public order.¹⁷ In an attempt to restore the communal peace that sex workers violated with their boisterous solicitations and refusal to conform to the gender and sexual norms of their society, the courts initially attempted to incarcerate both brothel workers and streetwalkers. However, this quickly proved impractical given the limitations of city resources. In response, Baltimore's courts began to develop what amounted to a tacit system of regulation, designed to contain prostitution and minimize its harm to the public as much as possible. Although streetwalkers and brothel sex workers were both vagrants by the standards of the common law, the courts summarily punished the former with incarceration in the city's almshouse or jail while awarding the latter due process rights and issuing them graduated, affordable fines. These fines, which provided local courts and public dispensaries with revenue, were licensing fees by any other name. At a time when few Americans believed that prostitution could be suppressed entirely, brothels that kept illicit sexuality legible enough to be monitored but ultimately contained were preferable to more public forms of sex work. Authorities tolerated brothels accordingly, especially since their

¹⁷ William J. Novak, *The People's Welfare: Law and Regulation in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 149–90; Mark Kann, *Taming Passion for the Public Good: Policing Sex in the Early Republic* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 129–60.

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managers were either propertied themselves or personally connected to people who were.

And yet the court's tacit bargain with property owners would not endure in its antebellum form for long. The central arguments in Chapters 5 and 6 are that the Civil War and Reconstruction represented a pivotal moment in the history of prostitution's regulation, at least locally. War brought new economic pressure on households, influxes of newly emancipated and impoverished women from the countryside, and thousands of Union troops whose job it was to secure the city and defend its rail lines. Under such conditions, Baltimore's sex trade expanded rapidly and far beyond its antebellum boundaries. So-called patriotic young ladies turned their attention to servicing enlisted men in local taverns and low-end brothels and officers in local hotels and parlor houses.¹⁸ As has so often been the case during wartime, concerns about soldiers abandoning their duties to go on "sprees" in brothels and contracting venereal diseases that could take them out of commission for weeks or months drew the attention of both military and civil officials to the sex trade. Although Baltimore's sex workers largely managed to stave off crackdowns on their businesses by cooperating with Union officers and providing them with intelligence gathered from unwary or braggadocious clients, discussions of the threat that prostitution posed to public health and the public order continued long after sex workers' contributions to the war effort ended.

While a growing awareness of prostitution's effects on public health would have long-term consequences for the future of the trade, more immediately relevant were the changes the war brought to understandings of property rights and citizens' relationship to the state. War destabilized the institution of slavery both nationally and in Maryland, leading to the creation of a new state constitution that outlawed the institution in 1864 and (ostensibly, at least) ushered in an era of free labor. In Baltimore, anxieties about black migrants' ability to self-regulate under a free labor regime led to an increasingly strident enforcement of vagrancy laws that targeted, among others, public sex workers. Indoor sex workers were somewhat protected from the worst effects of crackdowns on vagrancy, but they too felt the effects of the state's expanded authority in the aftermath of the war. As the Civil War and Reconstruction recast the

¹⁸ James Bollar to Michael Hammons, February 7, 1862. From the Catalog of the Historical Shop, Cary Delery. Quoted in Thomas P. Lowry, *Sex in the Civil War* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2006), 106.

state as an affirmative protector of its citizens' liberties and rights to profit from their own labor, urban dwellers began to lobby the state to take a more active role in securing their property values by providing them with services and abating nuisances. Brothels became one such nuisance. Baltimoreans who had once conceived of prostitution primarily as a threat to public order and morality increasingly framed it as a material threat to their individual rights to enjoy and profit from their property and demanded that the state act to spare them damages.¹⁹

In response, local officials and the courts began to use a legal precedent that had been set in 1857 but seldom enforced until the latter years of the Civil War in order to usher in a new period of legal and spatial regulation of commercial sex. Previously, it had been sufficient for illicit sex to be contained within brothels, where it could be monitored and pushed out of sight as much as possible. Beginning in the 1860s, however, Baltimore's courts, police, and citizens increasingly began to demand that commercial sex be removed from particular areas of the city and, by extension, forced into others. Wealthy brothel landlords, who grew increasingly disinvested in commercial sex as downtown industrial development created opportunities for more profitable use of real estate, did not resist. Sex workers themselves largely capitulated in order to maintain their working relationships with the police and protect their businesses. The result was the creation of informally organized but established red-light districts whose existence made it possible for officials to order the city and protect the property rights of homeowners in "respectable" neighborhoods.

Part III focuses on how the sex trade changed with the rise of red-light districts and the growth of an industrial economy that altered urban labor and social practices. Chapters 7 and 8 trace the changing demographics of the local sex trade and the gradual – and related – decline of brothel prostitution. As authorities pushed brothels out of "respectable" neighborhoods, sex establishments relocated to areas of the city with poorer housing stock and residents who were less able to protest their incursions. Red-light districts where brothels predominated rapidly became populated by black Baltimoreans, who faced poverty and housing

¹⁹ *Hamilton v. Whitridge*, *Maryland Reports: Containing Cases Argued and Adjudged in the Court of Appeals of Maryland* 11 (Baltimore, 1858), 128–47. See also Peter C. Hennigan, "Property War: Prostitution, Red-Light Districts, and the Transformation of Public Nuisance Law in the Progressive Era," *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities* 16, no. 1 (2004): 123–98; Adam Malka, *The Men of Mobtown: Policing Baltimore in the Age of Slavery and Emancipation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).