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Archaeology in Sin City

The brothel was a social and economic institution of the 19th-century American city. Houses advertised in city guidebooks and newspapers, and clients came from all classes and ethnic groups. Many proprietors were well known, and prostitution was a profession listed in the manuscript census. Prostitution's principal venue, the brothel, was part of the urban landscape. The defining feature of the brothel was, of course, sex for a fee, but there were several recognized classes of brothel. The class of the house was characterized by the youth, beauty, and talents of its prostitutes; services offered; and ambience. High-class houses charged high rates and offered the most desirable women, expensive food and beverages, and best furnishings. The high-class brothel also protected its resident prostitutes from unruly clients and meddlesome police and provided comfortable living accommodations and meals. Lower-class houses offered less and charged less. Streetwalkers offered the most basic service and faced the greatest personal risk.

The location of the most discreet of the houses was closely guarded, but many high-class brothels were urban landmarks. They appear on bird's-eye views and are noted as female boardinghouses on insurance maps. In addition to notations in newspapers and census records, brothels and their proprietors were cited in police and court records, but not nearly so often as streetwalkers who worked without the protection of the brothel.

Streetwalkers were often subject to fines and imprisonment, but when a madam or prostitute of a high-class house ran afoul of the law, usually payment of a fine--or at worst, a change of venue--permitted the business to resume operation. Fornication, lascivious behavior, and loitering were illegal in most cities, but operation of a boardinghouse for the purpose of prostitution was not regulated in many jurisdictions until the early-20th century. During much of the 19th

century, prostitution was accepted as a necessary evil: the prostitute's service saved virtuous wives from excessive demands for sex, as men were not expected to endure fidelity or chastity.

Prostitution was one of the few lucrative employment options available to women in the 19th century. Employment options for women, such as domestic service, sewing, shopkeeping, factory work, and teaching, barely paid a living wage, let alone enough to support dependents. Prostitution paid far more, and the brothel provided protection and many comforts. Streetwalkers or workers in low-class houses or cribs earned less and had no protection from violent or abusive clients.

Owning or operating a brothel could also be a rewarding business opportunity. For some women, prostitution was a family business, and the career path from prostitute to brothel keeper or owner led to economic success and comfortable retirement in the country. Illness, destitution, or death was the fate of others. Little is known of these unfortunates, but historical sources and the archaeological record document the life and material culture of the successful businesswomen, as well as some of those who passed through cribs and the judicial system.

Were prostitutes exploited by social codes and punitive laws that allowed men to pursue their sexual desires, punished women who even acknowledged desire, and criminalized women who expressed their sexuality? Or did these women exploit male weakness to achieve economic independence? Were prostitutes victims or women in charge of their own destinies? The simple answer to all of the above is "yes." The challenge is in understanding the contradictions of the prostitute's life.

The act of prostitution is not directly observable in the archaeological record, but the venue, the brothel, can be identified through analyses of documentary and archaeological evidence. Although brothels were common in 19th-century cities, the archaeology of this site type has not received the attention devoted to other types of households or commercial establishments. The literature is full of reports on excavations of working-class family households, taverns, workshops, and mills, but

there are few reports on brothels. It is likely that some brothels have been excavated without being recognized, particularly those not clearly identified through documents. Brothels are hard to definitively identify from their material culture alone, as there is no single artifact signature for a brothel. Nevertheless, brothel assemblages are generally different from neighboring kin-based households. Isolating and understanding the differences is the objective.

This collection of papers was developed to address the archaeology of the brothel as a site type. The sites include brothels in the East, Midwest, and West and represent several classes of brothels, dating from the 1840s through the turn of the century. The authors emphasize various aspects of prostitution and brothel life, including material culture, household composition, health, diet, clientele, and the law.

In most cases, the archaeologists contributing to this collection found brothels when they evaluated the cultural resources potential of land slated for development. They did not seek out a brothel, but after one was identified, they had to decide how to best realize its information potential. As the reader of this collection will see, archaeologists approached this site type in different ways. The authors of these papers were specifically asked to consider the kinds of information that can be learned from the excavation and analysis of a brothel site. Historical archaeologists know that documentary sources provide valuable but limited information. Written sources always have a purpose: they are intended to record particular information and omit other information. They never include everything the student of human culture wants to know. The authors in this volume demonstrate that the complementary archaeological record may corroborate or contradict historical record and can yield information about brothel life that cannot be known from other sources.

The first two papers address the archaeological assemblage of a privy shaft associated with a brothel in New York City. Rebecca Yamin considers the wealth and independence of working-class prostitutes in this 1840s brothel in the Five Points neighborhood. The artifact assemblage and food remains of the brothel express both working-class material culture and middle-class comforts, and Yamin interprets this duality in terms of the positive and negative aspect of

the prostitutes' lives. The Five Points privy shaft also yielded the skeletal remains of two full-term human neonates and a fetus. Thomas Crist moves from the straightforward analysis of the physical remains to the more complicated issues of social and legal positions on infanticide, abortion, and the choices faced by pregnant women from the late-18th century to the mid-19th century.

Mary Ann Hall's Washington, DC, brothel is also the subject of two papers. Hall operated her high-class establishment at the foot of Capitol Hill from about 1840 to the late 1870s. Elizabeth Barthold O'Brien presents the documentary evidence that illuminates the social and legal history of Hall's career and her house. Donna J. Seifert and Joseph Balicki complement O'Brien's documentary research with their analysis of the archaeological assemblage from an 1860 to 1870 context. The archaeological evidence reflects a large household and demonstrates that Hall's house was indeed furnished with expensive tablewares, exotic foods, and costly champagne.

Nina Clifford's St. Paul brothel was excavated and interpreted by K. Anne Ketz, Elizabeth J. Abel, and Andrew J. Schmidt. The authors address the differences between the front-yard and backyard assemblages and contrast the public perceptions of the glamorous life of the residents with the archaeological evidence of poor health.

Western brothels and saloons are the focus of Catherine Holder Spude's contribution. She examined five saloon and three brothel sites from working-class mining communities and from an urban neighborhood in Los Angeles (also addressed in the last paper in this collection). Spude looks at the frequencies of gender-specific items in saloons and in brothels to facilitate the identification of sites not documented in written records. She demonstrates the utility of this method and argues that clearer discrimination of site occupants will help archaeologists understand the roles of men and women in the Euro-American settlement of the West.

The Los Angeles parlor house at the turn of the century is examined by Michael D. Meyer, Erica S. Gibson, and Julia G. Costello. Domestic deposits of the house's neighbors were also analyzed and compared with the brothel. The authors contrast the material culture associated with the parlor house and the lowly crib and compare the expensive tablewares and groom-

ing artifacts of the parlor house with the lower frequencies of both classes of artifacts in the neighborhood households.

Two scholars were asked to comment on the papers. Diana diZerega Wall brought her knowledge of urban historical archaeology, feminist sensitivity, and critical eye to her discussion of the contributions of the papers. Timothy J. Gilfoyle approached the papers with an historian's knowledge of brothels and prostitution drawn from the documentary record and critiqued the archaeologists' interpretations of that record, while demonstrating his openness to the contributions of archaeology in understanding the past.

Taken together, the papers and commentaries offer a significant body of information and a range of approaches to the study of the 19th-century brothel. Like all good research, the collection offers new findings as well as unresolved problems for further research. This is surely not the last word on brothels; rather, the authors hope that this collection will urge forward other archaeologists in the study of this shady corner of the past.

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