

City of Ill Repute: Labor and Sex Work in Knoxville, Tennessee, 1890-1914

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my grandmothers: Ann Shaw, who taught me to love antiques and artifacts and showed me the past is not a foreign country if you know the right people; and Linda Perry Thompson (1948-2017), who gave me the gift of reading and showed me how to work hard and love diligently.

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Abstract

This study argues that Knoxville, Tennessee, is a city particularly poised for a study of sex work as informal labor during the New South and emphasizes the years between 1890 and 1914. During these years, much of the city's public debate surrounding regulation or prohibition of sex work occurred. The lives and industry of Knoxville's sex workers can be best understood through the lens of labor. Between 1890 and 1893, Knoxville experienced the shockwaves of what became the Coal Creek War. This event led Knoxville's to experience a particular kind of public labor awareness, leading to public debates that positioned sex work as either a regulated industry or as a prohibited crime. These discussions persist into the modern day as attitudes surrounding sex and agency shift. By engaging in a historically informed perspective, we may be able to draw conclusions about contemporary beliefs surrounding labor and sex work.

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Introduction

In 1938, James Agee published *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, a freeform prose poem detailing his idyllic youth in the titular city of Knoxville, Tennessee, during the titular summer of 1915. In this poem, Agee reflects on sunset evenings in his childhood home, located in Knoxville's Highland Avenue in a district known then as the West End and known now as the Fort Sanders district. Agee's work is nostalgic, wistful. The poem ends as follows:

*"Sleep, soft smiling, draws me unto her: and those receive me, who quietly treat me, as one familiar and well-beloved in that home: but will not, oh, will not, not now, not ever; but will not ever tell me who I am."*¹

Knoxville in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a unique place. Historian Bruce Wheeler argues that Knoxville was "not so much a southern city as an Appalachian urban enclave."² Nestled in the Appalachian mountain range, the city is well-positioned to make use of natural resources like coal and iron deposits. The shifting status of New South industry in Knoxville demonstrates the importance of understanding this place and time within a labor context.

After the Civil War, reformers and boosters used the term "New South" to herald the region's changing societal and economic structures as well as its nascent postwar attitudes. For a city like Knoxville that became rapidly obsessed with industrialization, the New South provided opportunities. Its growth from town to city in the late nineteenth century was spurred by the introduction of industrial investments like the establishment of the Knoxville Iron Company in 1868 and the introduction of textile mills like Knoxville Woolen Mills in 1884. Pre-Civil War

¹ James Agee, *A Death in the Family*, (New York: McDowell, 1957), 3.

² William Bruce Wheeler and Michael J. McDonald, *Knoxville, Tennessee: A Mountain City in the New South*, 2nd ed, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 27.

business elites like Charles McClung McGhee invested in railways; McGhee merged two major railroads into the East Tennessee, Virginia, and Georgia Railway that covered miles of tracks.

The city expanded geographically throughout the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Events like the 1910 and 1911 Appalachian Expositions attracted visitors and industry. With these urban developments came growing pains. To many, New South Knoxville was an example of how industry and development could open up the Appalachian region to the wider world. To others, the city could be dirty, violent, and plagued with vice. Hogs roamed muddy streets, coal dust suffocated workers, the murder rate quickly climbed, and brothel madams openly listed their businesses in city directories. Nonetheless, by 1885, the city became the fourth leading wholesaling center in the entire South, surpassed only by Atlanta, New Orleans, and Nashville.³ Knoxville had arrived.

The years between 1890 and 1914 were a time of uneasy truce between Knoxville elites and the working class, including informal economy laborers. Wheeler argues that the city's unprecedented economic growth led to elites' "growing unwillingness to become involved" in broader conversations about Knoxville's public good.⁴ This resulted in some of the economic, social, and political ills that anti-vice reformers attempted to rectify in the early twentieth century.

The resistance of some elites to fight Knoxville's societal ills did not exist in a vacuum, however. During this time Knoxville was "in a perfect position to take advantage of the New South Movement" and the city had "rail connections, natural resources...and a potential labor pool."⁵ It was this labor pool that frightened elite Knoxvillians into accepting modes of labor that

³ Wheeler, 18.

⁴ Wheeler, 34.

⁵ Wheeler, 8.

promoted lifestyles not coherent with their conservative values in order to avoid another labor uprising like the Coal Creek War of 1890-1893.

Whether avoidant or involved in vice reform, regulation, or prohibition movements, Knoxvilleians were aware of the goings-on around them. The city boasted multiple newspapers between 1890 and 1915, including the Republican-leaning *Knoxville Journal and Tribune* and the more centrist *Knoxville Sentinel*. Many of the city's crime reports and city council minutes now survive only as reported in these publications. Debates about morality and labor splashed across the pages for decades as a rapidly-growing city attempted to define itself.

Knoxvilleians' awareness of these issues led to public debates and discussions of sex work. This discursive turn surrounding the ethics of sex work persists even now as historians, sociologists, philosophers, and legal scholars attempt to identify the limits of sex workers' agency and ability to make informed, uncoerced choices. Scholars argue whether sex workers are exploited either through legalization of prostitution or prohibition of the industry. Studying this historical moment of attempted pseudo-regulation can help us understand how elite factors mitigated class conflict by easing up on societal rules or by making changes to those rules. Moreover, understanding that these debates were occurring throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries offers a historically informed perspective that may help to make sense of contemporary concerns surrounding sex work and its labor capacity.

This work relies upon years of scholarship on sex work and labor in American history. Less has been written about sex work in the South compared to studies of sex work in Northern cities, and one aim of this work is to add to that scholarship. Moreover, as studies of sex workers in the North as laborers in American history proliferate, the strong historiographical foundation of Southern women's labor can help add to this scholarship on sex work as labor in the South.

This thesis will only historiographically engage works that focus on the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries after the Civil War.

This work focuses on New South Knoxville in particular because the context of rapid Appalachian industrial growth during this period characterizes the labor violence related herein and the reaction to that uprising. Knoxville typifies the Appalachian New South ethos, but the city's reaction to sex work regulation is unique. Other Southern cities did corral sex workers into red-light districts during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but Knoxville lawmakers relaxed their attitudes toward sex work several years later than those other cities. This work argues that the delay is because of the Coal Creek War.⁶ Though other unique scholarship has been produced that deals with various geographic locations and time periods and adds broadly to this conversation, it is ultimately not useful to place those works in conversation in the context of this work due to both thematic and spatial concerns.

Literature Review

Sex work is work. This feminist rallying cry has been met with both celebration and derision. Coined by activist Carol Leigh in the mid-twentieth century, the phrase “sex work” was a term meant to marshal support and ally all sex workers, not just prostitutes, as laborers in solidarity.⁷ Establishing sex work as a unique laboring enterprise that foregrounds its largely female workers has been a common theme in feminist activism for decades.

In sociological and philosophical studies, understanding sex work as labor has been prevalent for some time.⁸ Ole Martin Moen argues that, as casual sex becomes more socially acceptable, prostitution ought to become more socially acceptable and that sex work “is no more

⁶ Maryjean Wall, *Madam Belle: Sex, Money, and Influence in a Southern Brothel*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 9.

⁷ Jill Nagle, ed., *Whores and Other Feminists*. (New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁸ Ronald Weitzer, “Sociology of Sex Work.” *Annual Review of Sociology* vol. 35 (January 1, 2009): 220.

harmful than a long line of occupations that we commonly accept without hesitation.”⁹ Though some have debated this theoretical framework, arguing that embracing sex work as labor is a problematic viewpoint, many theorists have accepted sex work as an ethical form of labor that presupposes the agency of all parties who partake in it.¹⁰

Feminist ethicists generally center the debate concerning prostitution around the liberal view and the radical feminist view. The liberal view calls for decriminalization and normalization of sex work, while radical feminism aims to prohibit or abolish the trade, arguing that women are societally objectified and thus unable to be true agents when employed as sex workers.¹¹ Legal scholars, too, have offered up ethical critiques about how to treat sex work as regulated labor.¹²

Despite this, historians have only recently begun to engage with this intellectual tradition. Early scholars were hesitant to write about the indelicate institution of sex work. However, an increased interest in women’s history during its academic rise in the 1970s and 1980s meant that historians were able to discuss sex work within the context of the women involved. Ruth Rosen’s book *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (1982) was one of the first monographs to deal with prostitution in the United States. These works were informed by feminist ideas and often focused on the degraded status of sex-working women. The advent of second-wave feminism created an explosion in the academy of studies of women’s history.

⁹ Ole Martin Moen, “Is Prostitution Harmful?” *Journal of Medical Ethics* vol. 40, no. 2 (February 28, 2014): 73.

¹⁰ Anna Westin, “The Harms of Prostitution: Critiquing Moen’s Argument of No-Harm.” *Journal of Medical Ethics* vol. 40, no. 2 (February 1, 2014): 87.

¹¹ Some recent examples of these ongoing debates include: Agustin Vicente, “Prostitution and the Ideal State. A Defense of a Policy of Vigilance.” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* vol. 19, no. 2 (April 2016): 475–487; Jeffrey Gauthier, “Prostitution, Sexual Autonomy, and Sex Discrimination.” *Hypatia* vol. 26, no. 1 (January 1, 2011): 166–186; Hallie Rose Liberto, “Normalizing Prostitution Versus Normalizing the Alienability of Sexual Rights: A Response to Scott A. Anderson” *Ethics* vol. 120, no. 1 (October 2009): 138–145.

¹² Jane Scoular, “What’s Law Got to Do with It? How and Why Law Matters in the Regulation of Sex Work.” *Journal of Law and Society* vol. 37, no. 1 (March 1, 2010): 12–39.

Historians of women, often engaged in feminist activism themselves, began to write about prostitutes specifically. These initial studies followed the conceits of social history, focusing on how women prostitutes lived their lives in different areas of the United States.¹³

Other books focused on crime and included sex workers in studies of urban vice. Historians in this vein often focused on Progressive Era reformers and their impact on the sex work system. Barbara Meil Hobson's work *Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition* (1987) is an example of this kind of scholarship. In *Uneasy Virtue*, Hobson related the economic health of cities historically to their laws regarding sex work.¹⁴ Though she acknowledges reform movements have often sought to rectify class, race, and gender biases and better the lives of sex workers, those attempts "have been shaped by sexual politics and class interests."¹⁵ Though Hobson's work and others that are part of this trend were doubtless shaped by social history, she emphasizes that her intent is not to discuss the everyday lives of specific prostitutes. Rather, she intended to analyze structural legal changes, often influenced by class, race, and gender biases, that affected the lives of sex workers.

New discursive developments meant that historians turned to sex work to help explain economic, cultural, and even political history. In his book, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (1992), Timothy Gilfoyle drew

¹³ Similar works include: Al Rose, *Storyville, New Orleans, Being an Authentic, Illustrated Account of the Notorious Red-Light District*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1974); Jacqueline Baker Barnhart, *The Fair but Frail: Prostitution in San Francisco, 1849-1900*, (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1986); Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Women and Prostitution: A Social History*, (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1987); Anne M. Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West, 1865-90*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Linda Mahood, *The Magdalenes: Prostitution in the Nineteenth Century*, (New York: Routledge, 1990); Marilyn Wood Hill, *Their Sisters' Keepers: Prostitution in New York City, 1830-1870* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Scott W. Stern, *The Trials of Nina McCall: Sex, Surveillance, and the Decades-Long Government Plan to Imprison 'Promiscuous' Women*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

¹⁴ Similar works include: Edward J. Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice: The Jewish Fight against White Slavery, 1870-1939*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1983); Thomas C. MacKey, *Red Lights Out: A Legal History of Prostitution, Disorderly Houses, and Vice Districts, 1870-1917*, (New York: Routledge, 1987); Ruth M. Alexander, *The 'Girl Problem': Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900-1930*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

¹⁵ Hobson, 4.

conclusions about capital through the lens of sex work. Though sex workers were initially represented as helpless or lacking in choices, historians have now begun to emphasize their agency and ability to make choices, however limited those choices may have been. For men, this transgression meant the ability to engage in sexual activities outside of marital bounds, enabling them to shed the requirements of respectability promulgated by nineteenth century gender beliefs.¹⁶

City of Eros refers to nineteenth century men who transgressed middle class sexual sensibilities as “sporting men.” These men promoted “male sexual supremacy” by engaging in communal male drinking and lashing out at independent women by participating in brothel riots, destroying bordellos. According to Gilfoyle, an increase in incidents of prostitution in New York City changed the “moral economy” of the city, leading to the expression of sexual desire through “institutions of public leisure and commercial exchange.”¹⁷ These sporting men proceeded to organize their sexuality through market forces, treating sex as “a secular commodity, invested with exchange value, for the benefit of heterosexual males.”¹⁸ Gilfoyle was able to combine previous historiographical innovations that centered on the economic history of sex work with analysis driven by developments in gender theory.

Kevin J. Mumford argued in *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (1997) that not only did ideas about gender complicate

¹⁶ Similar works include: Paula Petrik, "Capitalists with Rooms: Prostitution in Helena, Montana, 1865-1900." *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 31, no. 2 (1981): 28-41; Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York*, (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1998); Elizabeth Alice Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); 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); April R. Haynes, *Riotous Flesh: Women, Physiology, and the Solitary Vice in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

¹⁷ Timothy B. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1992), 98.

¹⁸ Gilfoyle, 313.

perceptions of sex workers, but ideas about race, as well. Though many previous works had either focused on sex work specifically performed by white women or black women exclusively, in *Interzones* Mumford argues that interracial sexual behavior should be understood within its own category of analysis. Sex workers and their clients in Chicago and New York created unique opportunities for interracial engagement. Moreover, fears of this interracial engagement spurred aforementioned Progressive reformers to intervene more strongly in vice districts. Mumford contended that fears of interracial sex between black and white sex workers and clients were the onus for reform movements.

Recent scholarship that deals with the history of American sex work has begun to analyze sex work through the lens of an informal labor economy. For example, works like LaShawn Harris's *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners* (2016) place sex workers within a larger framework of informal labor. Harris seeks to rectify the gap in urban labor historiography by examining the activities of women involved in the informal labor market of early twentieth century New York City. In New York, Harris argues, this resulted in black women recognizing the inherent value of their labor. This recognition helped them define "labor equality and fairness according to their own sensibilities," furthering ideas of black women's patterns of resistance.¹⁹

Southern labor historiography can also help us understand sex work in the South. Though historians of Southern labor were initially slow to acknowledge the labor and union work of Southern women laborers, they began to understand that Southern textile milling operations were constructed in a particularly gendered way. *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (1987) by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall and co-written by James L. Leloudis, Robert R. Korstad,

¹⁹ LaShawn Harris, *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners: Black Women in New York City's Underground Economy*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 9.

Mary Murphy, and Lu Ann Jones typifies how historians were beginning to use new frameworks of gender as a category of analysis in order to understand laboring women. These historians refuted early arguments about Southern factory culture as a paternalistic endeavor. Rather, they chose to emphasize the familial structure and present Southern workers as part of a continually negotiated system of authority between employer and employee.²⁰

Historians soon shifted their focus, writing about perceptions of Southern laboring women's strike activities. In *Half Sisters of History* (1994), a collection of essays on Southern women, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall refreshed some of her earlier scholarship by writing about striking women textile mill workers from Elizabethton, Tennessee, in the 1920s.²¹ The employees in the Elizabethton rayon mills were largely white rural women hailing from agrarian communities. Their recent move from an agricultural economy to a more industrialized space meant that they were liable to be paid less for their labor than Northern workers. Due to this low pay, however, these women went on a strike that eventually necessitated the involvement of the Tennessee National Guard.

²⁰ Similar works include: Ken Fones-Wolf, *Glass Towns: Industry, Labor and Political Economy in Appalachia, 1890-1930s*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Melton Alonza McLaurin, *Paternalism and Protest: Southern Cotton Mill Workers and Organized Labor, 1875-1905*, (Westport: Greenwood Publishing, 1971); Robert H Zieger, *Southern Labor in Transition, 1940-1995*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997); Timothy W. Vanderburg, *Cannon Mills and Kannapolis: Persistent Paternalism in a Textile Town*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2013); Robert H. Zieger, *American Workers, American Unions*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

²¹ Similar works include: Virginia Bernhard, *Southern Women: Histories and Identities*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992); Barbara S. Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); Michelle Haberland, *Striking Beauties: Women Apparel Workers in the U.S. South, 1930-2000*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015); Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South." *Journal of American History* 73: (1986). Tedesco, Marie. "Claiming Public Space, Asserting Class Identity, and Displaying Patriotism: The 1929 Rayon Workers' Strike Parades in Elizabethton, Tennessee." *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 12, no. 2 (2006). Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, (New York City: Columbia University Press, 1999); Vincent J. Roscigno and William F. Danaher. *The Voice of Southern Labor: Radio, Music, and Textile Strikes, 1929-1934*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Roxanne Newton, *Women Workers on Strike: Narratives of Southern Women Unionists*. (New York: Routledge), 2007.

The militancy of these women had been ignored by historians, according to Hall, because they were reluctant to imagine Southern Appalachian women as capable of complex political thought or the fortitude to engage in a sometimes violent strike. Moreover, Hall argued that these striking women weaponized ideas about gender. Some of the women involved in the strike were openly sexual, flaunting their status as “‘new women’ making their way in a world their mothers could not have known.”²²

One weakness of these studies in particular was the lack of focus on African American women in any meaningful way. Historians acknowledged this oversight and attempted to rectify it by studying African American women’s labor specifically and creating unique ways of analyzing that work.²³ An example that embodies this historiographical moment is Tera W. Hunter’s book *To ‘Joy My Freedom* (1997). In her work, Hunter examines what it meant to be free for newly emancipated African American women in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Hunter calls this group the “black female majority,” women who earned their wages as domestic workers.²⁴ African American women laborers in the urban New South had to continually negotiate the meaning of their freedom. They fought with white employers both publicly and privately in order to gain some measure of autonomy. Despite this, Hunter argues, African American women’s lives were not wholly marked by oppression as they also organized both formally and informally to carve out spaces to “‘joy,” or enjoy their freedom.

²² Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Half Sisters of History: Southern Women and the American Past*, Ed. Catherine Clinton, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 204.

²³ Similar works include: Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, (New York: Verso, 1991); Mark Fannin, *Labor’s Promised Land: Radical Visions of Gender, Race, and Religion in the South*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003); *Reconsidering Southern Labor History: Race, Class, and Power*. Ed. Matthew Hild and Keri Leigh Merritt, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2018); Gary M. Fink and Merl Elwyn Reed, *Race, Class, and Community in Southern Labor History* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994).

²⁴ Tera W. Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), viii.

New scholarly trends increasingly focused on the problem of forced or coerced labor after the Civil War. Historians of slavery regularly analyzed the labor in which enslaved African American women were forced to engage.²⁵ After the Civil War, black women were forced into convict labor leasing systems where their labor was simultaneously necessary and degraded. Historians of convict labor leasing also emphasized the transition from rural agriculture to industrialization in the South. According to these scholars, however, this shift was built not upon the abundance of cheap white labor, as earlier historians had argued. Rather, the transition was due to increasing quantities of convict laborers. One work that typifies this historiographical trend is Talitha L. LeFlouria's *Chained in Silence* (2016).²⁶ LeFlouria identifies black convict women as the South's "most inconspicuous workforce," lamenting their lack of widespread historical study.²⁷ Not unlike the striking women of Elizabethton, Tennessee, written about by Hall, black convict women also fought for ways to perform their gender and maintain some semblance of agency. Though Elizabethton's workers positioned themselves as "new women" through their words and actions, black Southern women convicts used modes of resistance to identify themselves as feminine.

With the advent of writing on resistance and coerced labor by scholars like LeFlouria, scholars are now questioning what Southern labor looks like. Historians of labor now argue about what kind of work can be studied using a labor analysis. Ultimately, these questions problematize the foundation of the study of Southern labor itself. Is labor history merely the

²⁵ For more information on this phenomenon, see: Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

²⁶ Similar works include: Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*, (University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

²⁷ Talitha L. LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 5.

history of factory laborers, strikes, and solidarity? Studies of black women's free labor and convict labor leasing disputed these institutional assumptions, making resistance a key focus of Southern women's labor history. One recent work that challenges the bounds of who can be considered a laborer and what occupations can be analyzed using the lens of labor is Jessica Wilkerson's *To Live Here, You Have to Fight* (2019).²⁸ Wilkerson studied Southern Appalachian women in the 1960s and 1970s. These women were both wage earners and non wage earners. Nonetheless, her historical actors engaged in broad movements for social justice across the region and, she argues, were themselves laborers due to this activism work.

Bridging the gap between these two fields situates Southern women sex workers as part of an informal labor economy. The introduction of informal labor economy analysis within the context of Southern Appalachian labor history has the potential to invigorate both fields, introducing new historical problems and creating new opportunities for study. Recent writing on sex work and the informal labor economy in the South is being completed, but is largely focused on the coastal South.²⁹ The following study is necessitated by a focus on how industries and ideas about sex work and labor in the Appalachian South might be ubiquitous, much like Wilkerson and other historians of Appalachian labor have previously claimed. Questioning what labor looks like and where and how labor can be performed could produce meaningful studies about the labor of sex work outside of urban Northern contexts that combine to enrich the historiography of both fields.

²⁸ Similar works include: Shannon Elizabeth Bell, *Our Roots Run Deep as Ironweed: Appalachian Women and the Fight for Environmental Justice*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

²⁹ Sarah Pillman Amundson, "A Woman Lies Bleeding on the Ground: Prostitution and Underground Economy in Nineteenth Century Charleston," Master's Thesis, Iowa State University, 2017.

Notes on Organization

This thesis is structured into thematic chapters. Chapter One establishes the historical context of the Coal Creek War, a violent labor uprising by coal miners protesting against the introduction of convict labor near Knoxville in Anderson County, Tennessee. This chapter emphasizes the unique geography, industry, and organization that made this particular event so fearful to Knoxville elites. The Coal Creek War helped to create an uneasy compromise between Knoxville lawmakers and working class and informal economy laborers. Knoxville elites feared sparking another labor war, and primary sources specifically point to their fears about sex workers creating a similar environment to Coal Creek. This further establishes that Knoxville operated within a larger landscape of labor, illustrating how sex work may have been viewed as labor during this period. Understanding how the Coal Creek War and convict labor leasing defined ideas about labor in East Tennessee for decades is a necessary foundational step.

Chapter Two traces public debates in newspaper media where public officials, reformers, and everyday citizens discussed public policy direction toward regulation or prohibition of sex work in the city. This chapter outlines what the uneasy truce between elites and sex workers looked like and how that truce might be broken if sex workers got too close to elite spaces or acted out as “disorderly women.” This chapter makes use of city directories from 1891 to 1913 that list Knoxville’s madams and their names and addresses as it grapples with the introduction of a pseudo red-light district in Knoxville and the implications of what regulation of sex work in the South looked like for a period of time.

Chapter Three discusses Knoxville reform efforts specifically headed by the city’s elite women, like Lizzie Crozier French. Reformers continued to debate the morality and fiscal success of this regulatory process. This public forum provided a place for discussion and

demonstrates how cultural ideas about race, gender, and class permeated the culture of the city. The chapter then goes on to discuss the end of the era of truce and questions why this compromise between elites and sex workers may have ended.

This work uses city directories, city ordinances, newspaper articles, and crime reports to recreate New South Knoxville and the city's laboring sex workers. As other historians have pointed out, it is difficult to get at the lives of marginalized people whose voices do not always exist in the archive. Therefore, when it is necessary, this study employs the methodology of "disciplined imagination," a strategy set forth by LaKisha Michelle Simmons.³⁰ This study makes use of all of the available sources and fills the gaps where necessary with disciplined imagination about informal laborers.

Informal labor is a term that has been popularized only in recent years. The phrase "informal sector" once dominated discourses relating to work done by working class people that was unrecognized by public authorities. Scholars would come to reject this framework, however, arguing that it created "a false dichotomy between formal and informal."³¹ Informal labor is often gendered, as women are more likely to labor in work that goes unregulated by any entities.³² Women's labor is more precarious, especially in spaces without the support of unions or other institutions. It is here that an analysis using the construct of informal labor becomes historiographically useful. Those who labor in highly gendered spaces and have no access to a safety net are often the most difficult to study, as this lack of formal regulation or oversight can

³⁰ LaKisha Michelle Simmons, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 2015), 11.

³¹ Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Sex of Class: Women Transforming American Labor*, (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2007), 274.

³² Cobble, 275.

mean a lack of written primary source records. Using informal labor as a framework of analysis can help historians make sense of these workers.³³

One important thing to note when discussing the history of sex work is the problem of terminology. Timothy Gilfoyle, an eminent historian in this field, avoids using the term “sex worker,” though he admits the term “is less stigmatizing than ‘prostitute.’” He chooses “prostitute,” because it is more specific, noting that “sex work practices include more than just prostitution: erotic dancing, nude modeling, stripping, filmmaking, erotic massage, escort service work, and sexual surrogacy.”³⁴ In attempting to bridge the gap between the historiography of sex work and the historiography of Southern labor, however, this specificity is unnecessary. The labor of sexual service, regardless of the particular acts in question, is nonetheless labor. Using the term “sex work” conveys the laboring aspect of the sex economy.

By 1914, the city of Knoxville no longer listed its brothels, bawdy houses, and bordellos in city directories. It would appear that the city’s sex workers had largely gone underground, leading to Agee’s gentle city summer evenings and the end of extant sources available for this thesis. Nonetheless, his poem is still revealing. He writes of “summer evenings in Knoxville, Tennessee, in the time I lived there so successfully disguised to myself as a child.”³⁵ In much the same way, the sex workers in Knoxville’s history have been successfully disguised for some time. This work seeks to uncover those histories and understand the compromise between Knoxville elites, including lawmakers, and the city’s sex workers who acted as informal

³³ Books that also informed my theoretical analysis include: Carl P. Simon and Ann D. Witte, *Beating the System: The Underground Economy*, (Boston: Auburn House Publishing Company, 1982); *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* Ed. Ava Baron, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Caroline Gatrell, *Embodying Women’s Work*, (Berkshire, England: Open University Press, 2008).

³⁴ Timothy J. Gilfoyle, “Prostitutes in History: From Parables of Pornography to Metaphors of Modernity.” *The American Historical Review* 104, no. 1 (1999): 119-120.

³⁵ Agee, 2.

economy laborers. Understanding Knoxville's sex work compromise can help us comprehend modern debates surrounding the ethics of sex work. These persist into the modern day as attitudes surrounding sex and agency shift and grow. By engaging in a historically informed perspective, we may be able to draw conclusions about contemporary beliefs about sex work advocacy, whether those mean prohibition, regulation, or full legalization.

Chapter One: Coal Creek Troubles

“My song is founded on the truth/In poverty we stand,” J.W. Day warbles in a 1937 recording of “Coal Creek Troubles,” a ballad rescued from *viva voce* by John and Ruby Lomax several decades after the famed labor uprising. The Lomaxes spent the summer of 1937 recording Southern folk protest and work music for the Archive of American Folk Song. In Boyd County, Kentucky, they recorded Day’s rendition of the Coal Creek protest song in Jean Thomas’s house. Jean, to her credit, helped Day along when he forgot some lyrics. “How hard the millionaire will crush,” Day continued, “upon the laboring man.”³⁶

But the Coal Creek War did not occur in Kentucky. Rather, in 1890, the beginnings of this armed labor uprising were blooming near Knoxville in Coal Creek, a town that straddled Anderson and Campbell Counties just about twenty miles from Knoxville. Miners for the Tennessee Coal Mining Company, bolstered by the prospect of union support, sought to be paid in cash rather than scrip. The elimination of scrip, a kind of currency that could only be redeemed at Tennessee Coal and Iron’s company stores, was only one of their demands, but it was a big one. When denied this major stipulation among other requests, the conflict ignited into a full-blown uprising by April 1891 as coal mine owners began to replace local coal miners with convict laborers leased from the state of Tennessee’s prison system.

Convict labor leasing, a system of forced labor that mimicked slavery in many ways and disproportionately targeted African Americans, was a controversial practice. Coal Creek’s formerly wage-working miners revolted against the use of convict labor by burning and bombing the state prison stockades that had been set up, as well as destroying mine property. During this

³⁶ John A. Lomax Southern States collection, 1937 [sound recording]. 1937.
<https://lomaxky.omeka.net/items/show/97>

time, they also freed many of the convict laborers, instructing them on the best ways to either escape East Tennessee or to hide in the mountains.

Though nearly 300 individuals, mostly miners, were arrested and charged for their involvement in the Coal Creek War, only one trial ended with substantial jail time—a two year sentence. During the conflict, Knoxville became a haven for both miners and Tennessee State Militia men, directly exposing Knoxvilleans to the violence that was engendered through all-out class warfare brought about by ignoring the demands of laborers. By 1896, Tennessee became one of the first Southern states to end convict labor leasing.

This event had other, more subtle ramifications, as well. Knoxville elites, fearful of another Coal Creek War, altered arrests and punishments for sex workers after this uprising for two decades. Though this relationship may seem specious, sources demonstrate that lawmakers had legitimate reasons for these fears. Indeed, one of the defining moments of the Coal Creek War, the lynching of a white miner, occurred in a nearby brothel as striking workers and law enforcement used bawdy houses as both hideout and refuge.

Geography and Industry

To properly contextualize the Coal Creek War, one must have a sense of the unique geography of East Tennessee. One of the state's Grand Divisions, the gently sloping Great Smoky Mountain range characterizes this region. Natural resources, too, like coal and copper, abound in various parts of East Tennessee. During the Civil War, East Tennessee's reserves of iron ore became important as both North and South competed over the region's ironworks. After the Civil War, mining bituminous coal in places like Coal Creek became more common, and more profitable. Yankee boosters and businessmen began to collect large swaths of coal deposits throughout Appalachia, growing substantially wealthier and more powerful.

Indeed, even the name of the town of Coal Creek was influenced by the industry the town supported, and this trend continues to the present. Initially named Coal Creek because of its titular bituminous coal deposits, the town's name was subsequently changed to Lake City after the creation of nearby Norris Lake by the Tennessee Valley Authority in the 1930s. This was ostensibly meant to signal the city's participation in the effort to bring hydroelectricity to the Southeast, though local newspapers joked. "Shakespeare's 'What's in a name?' quotation doesn't apply to the Coal Creek-Lake City situation," wrote Ben Davis in 1939. "A letter to any other name than Coal Creek is returned by the post office!"³⁷ Then, in 2014, the town again changed its name. This time, city officials hoped that by claiming the moniker "Rocky Top" they could cash in on tourist dollars from fans of the fight song of the University of Tennessee Volunteers.

Labor and Violence

Coal Creek, then, had always been a town known for its industry and its money-making potential. Businessmen regularly traveled the train ride between Knoxville and Coal Creek, which took less than an hour. Many Coal Creek miners were Knoxvilleans themselves. Others came from other, more rural portions of Appalachian East Tennessee seeking wage labor. Still others were immigrants.

Convict labor leasing, a prison labor system that primarily targeted African Americans and African American men in particular became a widespread practice in the South after the Civil War. Though some scholars have compared convict labor leasing to slavery, other historians disagree, claiming that the two systems are so different they are impossible to

³⁷ Ben Davis, "Footnotes" *The Knoxville Journal*, March 25, 1939.

compare.³⁸ Regardless, the lucrative practice led to prison laborers being treated inhumanely and having little access to proper nutrition, clothing, or shelter. Historian Sarah Haley argues that during this time, “rigid cultural, legal, and social structures of segregation were systematically imposed in cities and towns across the South, ultimately consolidating into an entrenched racial caste system.”³⁹ Convict labor leasing was one key component of that enforced social order.

However, because of the abundance of white free laborers available in the region, convict labor leasing wasn’t introduced to mines in Anderson and Campbell Counties until the late 1880s, and then only sparsely. When the institution was brought to Coal Creek, however, miners were furious and ready to revolt. This insurrection didn’t just begin when the first convict laborers were brought to Coal Creek, however. Indeed, coal miners in East Tennessee had been gearing up for a labor battle for years.

In Jellico, Tennessee, just over the mountain from Coal Creek, more than a thousand coal miners had taken up arms in a months-long strike.⁴⁰ The 1889 strike was caused by coal mine operators reducing the payment for one ton of coal to seventy cents. Jellico’s miners, like many others throughout Appalachia, were required to buy their own mining tools. This fatal fiscal combination led to increased determination. One miner was asked whether the strikers planned to surrender. “Unconditionally, no,” he responded. “Of course we are willing to arbitrate the matter whenever the operators are ready to do so.”⁴¹ Jellico miners compared this five-cent wage

³⁸ Talitha L. LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

³⁹ Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*, (University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 23.

⁴⁰ “The Miners of Coal Creek Help the Striking Miners at Jellico” *The Journal and Tribune*, May 16, 1889.

⁴¹ “The Jellico Strike,” *The Journal and Tribune*, April 10, 1889.

reduction to “the price paid at Coal Creek where the miners get 50 cents a ton for the run of the mines.”⁴² Coal Creek, it would appear, was already a place known for its low wages.

Though the Tennessee Coal Mining Company did not employ convict labor until 1891, miners and their allies both in and around Coal Creek had been agitating against the institution for years. In 1885 an unidentified “youth” was arrested for shooting James Reeves, a convict labor guard in Coal Creek.⁴³ J.W. Reed, a prominent Campbell County doctor and legislator, also criticized the introduction of convict labor in Coal Creek. Recounting the heinous treatment of convicts at the hands of mine supervisors, Reed said in an interview that “The convicts are whipped unmercifully.” After outlining that convicts at Coal Creek in 1885 were not fed, clothed, or sheltered properly and were made to work in unsafe and unhealthy conditions for no pay, Reed continued “the treatment ought to be sufficient for anybody with a thimbleful of sense to take some action for the relief of the poor, depraved mortals, for it is nothing short of a slaughter pen.”⁴⁴ Even some Knoxville newspapers railed against the practice of convict labor leasing in editorials. Answering assumptions that without convict labor in Tennessee’s coal mines, convicts would become lazy, the *Knoxville Journal and Tribune* rebutted that “the convicts of the state of North Carolina are not kept in idleness and the state owns no coal mines in which to work them.”⁴⁵

By 1891, East Tennessee miners had been taking advantage of broader union support for years. They were bolstered by the gubernatorial election of John P. Buchanan in 1890. Buchanan was a leader in the Tennessee Farmers Alliance and supporter of unionization. Coal Creek miners had good reason to believe that Buchanan would continue his support of working class

⁴² “The Strike Ended,” *Knoxville Daily Tribune*, July 9, 1889.

⁴³ “News From Coal Creek,” *The Journal and Tribune*, August 21, 1890.

⁴⁴ “Inhuman Treatment of Convicts,” *The Republican Chronicle*, February 4, 1885.

⁴⁵ “The State’s Cut Throat Game,” *The Journal and Tribune*, February 20, 1889.

individuals and they were emboldened to pursue their demands.⁴⁶ These included the elimination of payment in scrip, which could only be used at company stores, in favor of cash payments. Miners also demanded to be able to employ their own checkweighman. A checkweighman weighed each day's bituminous plunder. Coal miners' pay was determined by the amount of coal they had mined, or the amount of coal the checkweighman measured. Since these officials were hired by the mining companies, miners believed their determinations of weight and payment were often skewed.

Paying workers in scrip was an illegal practice in the state of Tennessee by 1890, so other mining companies acquiesced to some demands. The Tennessee Coal Mining Company, who operated a mine near the unincorporated community of Briceville, however, did not. Indeed, Tennessee Coal Mining Company officials vociferously protested against the miners making any demands in an editorial in one Knoxville newspaper, writing, "For miners, or other employees to strike without notice is unfair, unmanly, and dishonorable."⁴⁷ The company even published the contract they required the miners to sign—highlights of the contract included a portion that expressly forbade miners from hiring their own checkweighman, one of their major demands.

The Tennessee Coal Mining Company also denied paying their workers in scrip. Rather, the company argued, it paid with a "punch-out" system that was similar to scrip, though the company denied any illegality. Indeed, the company maintained that it was protecting the morality of its workers, as "the dissipated miner will daily draw these 'checks' or 'scrip' as fast as the day's work is done." Miners were not to be trusted with cash wages, according to mine

⁴⁶ Pete Daniel, "The Tennessee Convict War." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1975), 275.

⁴⁷ "Statement of Tennessee Coal Mining Company" *The Journal and Tribune*, July 21, 1891.

owners, because “instead of buying merchandise as is its object they go to money brokers who charge them a twenty per cent discount for cash and then lose the cash in buying liquor.”⁴⁸

As the contract that was offered to them did not meet any of their demands, miners from the Tennessee Coal Mining Company refused to sign the contract. Because of this dissent, the Tennessee Coal Mining Company began use of convict laborers as other coal companies in and around Anderson and Campbell Counties had done in the mid-1880s. The introduction of convict labor both deterred potential union organizing and weakened the miners’ sense of job stability.

The agitation for labor rights and the end of convict labor leasing in and around Coal Creek was not a slow burn. When their employer rejected their demands, the sense of having nothing left to lose propelled striking miners to direct action. Indeed, when the Tennessee Coal Mining Company began to ship in convicts in July of 1891, the miners were ready to strike. On the night of July 14, the miners seized the stockade that had been built to house the newly-arrived convicts. By early morning light on July 15, the guards had surrendered without bloodshed, and the convicts were loaded onto a train bound for Knoxville.

Violence between miners and guards escalated as “the miners [were] determined that no convict shall be worked here.”⁴⁹ Miners repeatedly freed the new convicts that were continually brought in to replace previous newly-freed prisoners. Stockades were burned and company buildings were demolished and still miners kept placing convicts on trains and sending them to Knoxville with fresh food and civilian clothes. After Governor Buchanan intervened and brought in the Tennessee State Militia—a precursor to the National Guard—small gun fights between miners and militiamen abounded.

⁴⁸ “Statement of Tennessee Coal Mining Company” *The Journal and Tribune*, July 21, 1891.

⁴⁹ “Surrender!” *Knoxville Daily Tribune*, July 21, 1891.

In Knoxville, each train carrying guards and convicts was a spectacle, and when the train reached the city bearing the troops and convicts over one thousand people were gathered around the station. Knoxvillians were paying attention, but so was the rest of the world. Reports from Seattle, Washington, regarding the Coal Creek insurrection claimed that three thousand miners from across East Tennessee had traveled to Coal Creek to stand in solidarity with the striking miners.⁵⁰ By 1892, news of the Coal Creek War had spread to London, England.⁵¹

The Knoxville Sentinel and other city newspapers fervently reported on Coal Creek's major story—the lynching of Richard Drummond, a young white miner, by militiamen. On August 9, 1893, Dick Drummond was hanged from a railroad bridge in Briceville.⁵² Drummond was initially accused of murdering Private William Laugherty, a militiaman, in a bawdy house brawl in Briceville. Multiple stories exist that explain how Laugherty may have been shot, but after the coal dust settled, it was revealed that Drummond was not Laugherty's murderer. Indeed, Drummond's airtight alibi was posthumously confirmed by his landlady, Mrs. W. R. Landrum, who maintained that Drummond was "in his room from 8 o'clock of the night Laugherty was murdered until breakfast time the next morning."⁵³ Other boarders in the home confirmed this just as other miners reported that the men they saw hanging Drummond wore uniforms.

The saga of Laugherty's bawdy house murder and Drummond's subsequent suspected revenge lynching ignited fears of a continuing Coal Creek War just as the conflict itself was winding down. In the weeks before Drummond was hanged, the labor uprising had all but ended. The state of Tennessee had elected a new governor, Peter Turney, who championed the end of what newspapers were calling "Tennessee's Shame!" This shame was, of course, "Convicts in

⁵⁰ "In Terror of a Mob," *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, November 1, 1891.

⁵¹ "The Rioting in America: Desperate Fighting," *The Standard*, August 20, 1892.

⁵² "Lynched!" *The Knoxville Sentinel*, August 10, 1893.

⁵³ "Is it War?" *The Semi-Weekly Knoxville Sentinel*, August 12, 1893.

the Coal Creek Mines.”⁵⁴ This bawdy house brawl could have indicated a return to violence, indicating why lawmakers may have sought to ease up regulations on brothels within Knoxville.

After the Coal Dust Settled

After the lynching of Dick Drummond, the Coal Creek War no longer seemed sustainable. In 1893 Governor Turney settled on allowing Coal Creek’s convict labor leasing contracts to expire. This did not spell the end of prison labor, however. Rather, Turney worked to establish Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary where prisoners were no longer leased out by private companies. Instead, they were leased out to the government to perform labor exclusively for the state.

The specter of the Coal Creek War and convict labor leasing lingered even as the last convicts departed from the mines in 1889. Just a few years after the conflict, tales about “the mountaineers of Tennessee, who are utterly brave” abounded. The miners “deserved the sympathy and assistance” of the American Federation of Labor, wrote Andrew Roy in a 1907 book on the history of coal mining in the United States. Indeed, the AFL did once donate five hundred dollars to the striking Coal Creek miners’ reserves.⁵⁵ Coal Creek miners also still reportedly felt “the evil effects” as the state “put the coal they dig at the state’s Brushy mountain mines on the market and compete with the product of free labor.”⁵⁶

In nearby Knoxville, too, labor agitation that began in the late 1880s and exploded into violence in the early 1890s characterized an uneasy truce between labor coalitions and political coalitions. The elite of Knoxville had seen the power of a group of working class people every

⁵⁴ “Tennessee’s Shame! Convicts in the Coal Creek Mines,” McClung Historical Collection. Folder 67, Ephemera Collection.

⁵⁵ Roy, Andrew, *A History of the Coal Miners of the United States, from the Development of the Mines to the Close of the Anthracite Strike of 1902*, (Columbus, OH: J.L. Trauger Printing Company, 1907), 301, 302.

⁵⁶ “Coal Creek is Happy,” *The Journal and Tribune*, January 8, 1889.

time they waited with large groups of others at the train station to view the temporarily shamefaced and defeated militiamen and the briefly freed convict laborers. In 1893 after the last of the violence had died down, “participants in the ‘troubles’ were blacklisted, and the companies continued to insist on ‘iron-clad’ contracts” while battling unions.⁵⁷

Laugherty, it turns out, was shot and killed by an unknown murderer, despite the resultant lynching of Drummond for the supposed bawdy house killing. The labor violence that emanated from working class brothel spaces mattered. Now, elites across the region, and in Knoxville in particular, understood that appeasing that same working class was important. Moreover, since the biggest story of the Coal Creek War revolved around a lynching that resulted from an alleged murder in a brothel, the city’s lawmakers and law enforcement began to understand the power of sex workers in inciting labor violence. The city eased up its criminalization of sex work beginning in 1890. By 1891, Knoxville’s madams and their brothels would appear in city directories. Between 1893 and 1914, the Knoxville city commission voted at least twice to uphold a resolution “directing the police not to arrest prostitutes in the city unless they were engaged in some independent violation of the law.”⁵⁸ The regulation of sex work in Knoxville occurred primarily not because of benevolent impulses or capitalistic urges, but due to labor violence.

⁵⁷ Daniel, 292.

⁵⁸ “City Commission Unanimous on its Vice Question Attitude,” *The Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, May 5, 1914.

Chapter Two: An Uneasy Truce

New South Knoxville, Appalachia's urban enclave, was radically shaped by the vestiges of the Coal Creek War. In the wake of the nearby Coal Creek War, Knoxville's political elites made the decision to appease working class groups in order to avoid further armed labor insurgencies in the region. This went on for a twenty-year period in which sex workers were only arrested if they openly flouted codes of dress and behavior. The city's red-light district, Friendly Town, was well-known and largely left alone by authorities as a coalition built upon accommodation and regulation of sex work was created. What emerged both during and after the labor war was a city that was politically determined by elites. Those elites, in turn, would reduce strictures that once targeted the working class, and sex workers in particular, in order to preserve societal safety from future labor uprisings similar to the violence at Coal Creek. This uneasy truce led to a two-decade span wherein Knoxville law enforcement and lawmakers were hesitant to prosecute sex workers for prostitution alone.

This did not mean, however, that the laws themselves changed. Though no substantial new legislation banning prostitution appeared on the books, Knoxville had not always been a soft place for a sex worker to land. Instead, however, prostitution charges were typically only used to bolster other charges for incidents of brawling or public intoxication. Those who were charged for prostitution alone disputed their cases, arguing that they were targeted not due to keeping a brothel, but for keeping a brothel in a more expensive neighborhood.

Evidence of both this fraught compromise and of Knoxville's sex workers themselves can be found in available city directories. Between 1891 and 1913, Knoxville's brothel-keepers were listed in city directories under "Madam," while unmarried women were listed as "Miss" and married women as "Mistress." Historians can cross-reference this vernacular understanding as

identification as a sex worker by referring to contemporary newspaper articles about the women listed as madams in directories. As demonstrated later in this chapter, women listed as madams were arrested for things like brawling or public intoxication alongside prostitution charging, adhering to city council resolutions to only arrest women for prostitution if they transgressed other laws. This not-so-secret code publicly identified brothels as a legitimate, if undesirable, place of work.

This twenty year period of class conflict and class appeasement complicated traditional notions of authority, crime, and labor. Madams may not have run large-scale brothels; indeed, it appears most of Knoxville's madams worked either independently or with one or two other women in their place of business. Timothy Gilfoyle writes of prostitutes who "remained in the profession for decades," but in Knoxville, brothels were a revolving door of women. It would appear that the city's sex workers used their given names, but most did not stay in the profession for long, often moving around Central and Clinch Avenues.⁵⁹ Understanding sex work in the way many Knoxvilleians would have understood it over a century ago positions sex work as a form of labor.

One important thing to note here is an admitted problem with the extant primary sources that deal with Knoxville's sex workers. In contemporary newspaper articles about these women they are always assumed to be white, except when explicitly identified as other. Moreover, those African American sex workers I can find evidence of in the archive, like Josie Singleton or Mag Zimmerman, do not appear in Knoxville's city directories. Though this could be attributed to these women not being madams or working out of saloons and therefore remaining unlisted, it is logical to assume that race, then as now, played a part in how sex workers are perceived,

⁵⁹ Gilfoyle, 73.

portrayed, and policed. It is important to acknowledge that there are some missing voices here despite claims at the time that for those who frequented Knoxville's disorderly houses "the color line is very lightly regarded."⁶⁰

Though the current sources that exist on black sex workers in Knoxville during this period are scant, the aforementioned Singleton and Zimmerman do regularly appear. Mag Zimmerman, called "one of the ebony terrors of Cripple Creek" was accused of abducting a young black girl, Lillie Givens, in order to force the girl into sex trafficking in 1893.⁶¹ She was sentenced to ten years in prison for the attempted abduction, but records show she did not serve the full sentence as she was arrested for felonious assault just two years afterward.⁶² Indeed, one reporter said that Zimmerman, "one of the most notorious of the demi monde," had "fallen desperately in love with the workhouse...She no sooner serves a term out at the workhouse but in a day or two she is back."⁶³

Josie Singleton is the only other African American sex worker in Knoxville that shows up regularly in crime reports and newspaper articles during this twenty year period. In 1902 Abe Leek, who was elected as Deputy Sheriff almost ten years later, accused Singleton of "rolling" him out of \$225.⁶⁴ Cautiously, the *Knoxville Sentinel* initially disputed the facts of his allegations, writing, "'Honest' Abe Leek has the sympathy of the entire community for the loss of the \$225." The report continued, "But there are some coincidents [sic] in connection with the affair that are rather mystifying." The \$225 was reportedly profit Leek had gotten from selling his home. However, he reported his financial loss to the newspaper and to the police on the

⁶⁰ Wheeler, 27.

⁶¹ "Tedious Testimony," *The Semi-Weekly Knoxville Sentinel*, September 16, 1893.

⁶² "Was on the War Path Again," *The Journal and Tribune*, May 9, 1895.

⁶³ "Guilty of General Cussedness," *The Journal and Tribune*, April 18, 1893.

⁶⁴ "W.A. 'Abe' Leek," *The Knoxville Journal*, October 22, 1935.

morning of August 4th, and then subsequently claimed he was robbed by Singleton on the night of August 4th after he had already made the report.⁶⁵

Despite journalists publicly questioning Leek's honesty, Singleton was convicted and sentenced to seven years in prison.⁶⁶ She was ultimately pardoned by Governor James B. Frazier in 1905.⁶⁷ Just two years after being pardoned, Singleton was again in the papers after she was shot by a white man named Roscoe Hill.⁶⁸ Though initially her prognosis was grim, Singleton eventually recovered from the four gunshot wounds she sustained.⁶⁹ Hill was ultimately not convicted of any charges relating to Singleton's injuries, though he was later charged with larceny and made a defendant in a nuisance case for trafficking illegal liquor.⁷⁰ By 1937, Hill was a Knoxville police officer.⁷¹ Josie Singleton died in 1933.⁷²

It's important to acknowledge that though this work deals primarily with white sex workers, there is some evidence of African American sex workers in the city that still exists. However, these women were not afforded the same privileges white sex workers were afforded. The second-class status of black sex workers in Knoxville during this period meant that city resolutions intended to reduce arrests of prostitutes did not apply to all sex workers, as crime records demonstrate.

Compromise and Conflict

When miners at Coal Creek in nearby Anderson County began a prolonged armed labor revolt in 1890, East Tennesseans and Knoxvilleans in particular were forced to think critically

⁶⁵ "Was it League Money?" *The Knoxville Sentinel*, August 6, 1902.

⁶⁶ "Bound the Woman to Court" *The Knoxville Sentinel*, August 6, 1902.

⁶⁷ "Pardons by Gov. Frazier," *The Journal and Tribune*, March 26, 1905.

⁶⁸ "Josie Singleton Shot by Roscoe Hill," *The Journal and Tribune*, April 5, 1907.

⁶⁹ "Josie Singleton has Chance for Recovery," *The Knoxville Sentinel*, April 5, 1907.

⁷⁰ "Twenty-One Barrels of Intoxicants Captured," *The Knoxville Sentinel*, September 14, 1914.

⁷¹ "Policeman and His Cat," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, July 21, 1937.

⁷² "Death Ends Case" *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, May 22, 1933.

about how to control disorderly laboring populations. Indeed, journalists publicly warned against inciting future labor riots and class conflict. These editorials urged police authorities to stay away from brothels and bawdy houses, writing “It would be humiliating indeed if another Coal Creek war were precipitated by a bawdy house brawl and the fiendish malice of the very men on whom we have been relying to maintain the peace.”⁷³

Knoxville began to pass anti-vice legislation beginning with an 1838 ordinance that outlawed "misconduct." Those who kept bawdy houses were fined up to fifty dollars or imprisoned for three months. Later ordinances in the late 1860s prohibited females of known bad repute from “parading” the city streets and criminalized men who chose to walk publicly or take a carriage with a prostitute.⁷⁴

Though this same set of ordinances still theoretically penalized those who rented a home for the purposes of prostitution, newspapers bemoaned the situation and the “failure of the police to enforce the law” because “the keepers of these houses could make it very embarrassing for some members of the force if they chose to.”⁷⁵ The police were not the only group demonstrating unwillingness to arrest women on prostitution charges alone. In early 1914, Knoxville’s city board of commissioners voted once more to uphold “the resolution adopted by the commission some time ago, directing the police not to arrest prostitutes in the city unless they were engaged in some independent violation of the law.”⁷⁶

Before the Coal Creek War, lawmakers were already publicly criticized for their perceived laxity of enforcement of prostitution and vice laws. This wasn’t the first time

⁷³ “More About the Lynching” *The Knoxville Sentinel*, August 16, 1893.

⁷⁴ James B. Jones, "Municipal Vice: The Management of Prostitution in Tennessee's Urban Experience. Part I: The Experience of Nashville and Memphis, 1854-1917." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (1991): 117.

⁷⁵ “Police Failure” *Knoxville Daily Chronicle*, August 11, 1885.

⁷⁶ “City Commission Unanimous on its Vice Question Attitude,” *The Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, May 5, 1914.

Knoxville's police had been accused of "being naughty."⁷⁷ Local newspapers decried the city as being "overrun with bawdy houses" in 1885.⁷⁸ The labor uprising that began fomenting in 1890, however, made lawmakers fear class violence far more than the perception of being soft on crime. Instead of criminalizing keepers of bawdy houses, brothels, and bordellos, Knoxville's laws began to change to indict behaviors and performances that surrounded potential criminal behavior rather than the criminal behavior itself. The criminalization of Mother Hubbard dresses is one example of this change to performative behavioral monitoring rather than a widespread civic desire for genuine moral uplift.

In 1904, the city of Knoxville criminalized "Mother Hubbard" dresses.⁷⁹ The loose-fitting garment was designed to cover nearly all of a woman's exposed flesh, complete with a high neck and long sleeves. Modern viewers might liken these garments to choral robes or priests' vestments, but they were considered sexually inappropriate by many. Designed to liberate women from corsets' constraints in the 1880s, Mother Hubbard gowns were championed by health reformers and aesthetes alike. This article of clothing was worn by urban housekeepers and rural farm wives. Women of all ages and classes adopted this habit—older women, younger women, unmarried women, pregnant women, and children.⁸⁰

However, on Friday, October 7, 1904, the Knoxville city council made it a misdemeanor for women to wear Mother Hubbard dresses without a belted waist outside of their home. The city council decided that fines assessed for this crime could range from \$2.50 to \$50. At first glance, assessing a fine for women wearing a dress intentionally designed for full coverage

⁷⁷ "Are the Police Naughty?" *The Knoxville Journal*, September 13, 1890.

⁷⁸ "Knoxville Overrun With Bawdy Houses" *Knoxville Daily Chronicle*, August 10, 1885.

⁷⁹ "City Council's Busy Session Friday Night," *The Knoxville Sentinel*, October 8, 1904.

⁸⁰ Sally Helvenston Gray, "Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress." *Winterthur Portfolio* vol. 48, no. 1 (2014): 30.

seems odd. Mother Hubbard dresses, however, were designed to be worn over uncorseted female figures and “opened the male mind to think about the possibilities of accessing usually unavailable territory.”⁸¹ This ordinance was about controlling the unruly, natural female form.

This was an ordinance directed primarily at “lewd” women, sex workers, who sometimes wore Mother Hubbard dresses not just as house dresses, but also in public spaces. An earlier version of the law had been struck down because it mentioned those sex workers specifically. The Knoxville City Council was loath to aggravate this group of laborers. Knoxville’s political elites increasingly began to cater to the working class as fears of further labor unrest spread. Sex workers, the focus of this particular study, were widely considered part of that working class.

Other ordinances that more directly confronted and criminalized prostitution were largely disfavored by Knoxville lawmakers. In October 1890, a city ordinance proposal that made it illegal to rent a home to a known prostitute was voted down for the third time. Another motion by city council was proposed “in favor of throwing out all...ordinances related to bawdy houses, etc., out” to “relieve the chief of police from duties in that direction.”⁸² The motion carried.

Friendly Town was Knoxville’s mostly informal red-light district primarily located on Central Avenue. Throughout the 1890s, Knoxville appeared to have a pseudo red-light district as most brothels were located in a particular part of the city. The formal creation of Friendly Town, however, demonstrates a kind of acceptance of informal labor in Knoxville during this period indicated by a lack of action on the part of law enforcement. The first mention of Friendly Town as an official red-light district appeared in newspapers in early 1907. The article mentions other known names for this less-than-savory section of the city including “the bowery” and “Cripple

⁸¹ Gray, 50.

⁸² “Two Long Hours,” *Knoxville Daily Tribune*, October 11, 1890.

Creek.”⁸³ The name Cripple Creek was typically associated with poor African American neighborhoods in Knoxville. The fabrication of Friendly Town as a separate entity from Cripple Creek, despite being streets apart, also indicates a separation between white vice and black vice. I argue that the Friendly Town moniker was not merely an ironic nickname for a particular portion of town. Rather, the name Friendly Town indicated the relative hands-off approach law enforcement took in that part of town as well as its whiteness.⁸⁴

Lawmakers frequently pointed out the usefulness of a well-regulated red-light district, noting that Friendly Town “was one of the best, if not the best, regulated districts in this United States...the women remained to themselves, there was very little lawlessness in the district, and it gave the police very little trouble.”⁸⁵ Indeed, few records of arrests in Friendly Town proper exist. One of note regards the arrest of a person identified as male who was wearing female clothing. A reporter breathlessly described Oscar DeArmond’s attire as “a master piece of the dress maker’s art,” adding “it is said that few women presented as favorable appearance.”⁸⁶ DeArmond told police that he had borrowed the clothes from a woman friend after he lost a diamond stud, convinced that a “Friendly Town belle” was the thief and determined to investigate on his own. Himself a city patrolman, DeArmond was released before long as the police chief reportedly believed DeArmond’s gender-bending investigation excuses to be true.

Dirty Directories

Besides newspaper and crime reports, another piece of evidence that can demonstrate how sex work in Knoxville was regulated rather than prohibited at this time is the existence of

⁸³ “More Men for Police Force,” *The Knoxville Sentinel*, January 25, 1907.

⁸⁴ “Several Arrests Made by Police,” *The Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, April 1, 1907. This article is significant because it indicates the race of the man arrested: “Bill Brummitt, white,” who was charged with “selling liquor on Sunday.”

⁸⁵ “Prostitutes Everywhere,” *The Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, May 5, 1914.

⁸⁶ “Oscar D’Armond in Women’s Garb,” *The Knoxville Sentinel*, November 7, 1908.

city directories. City directories, as municipal publications, can provide information on not only residents but also businesses, as well. Between 1891 and 1913, Knoxville's madams were vociferous, and the addresses of bawdy houses and brothels openly appeared in city directories.⁸⁷

These publications can show how an unofficial red-light district was formed and came to be supported by lawmakers. Knoxville's city directories can help us understand how sex workers moved around both within and outside of Friendly Town. Typically, brothel keepers stayed in one home for one to three years before moving on to better streets. Madam Ella Smith, an anomaly, stayed at 408 Central Avenue for ten years between 1901 and 1911.⁸⁸ She moved on to 606 South Central Avenue in 1912. Meanwhile, Georgia Allen began listing her brothel on 409 Central Avenue in 1897. She moved to 504 Central Avenue in 1898 and relocated again to 510 Central Avenue in 1900. Allen eased on up the road twice more, moving in 1902 and 1904 before her listings ended. This public listing of brothels and other houses of ill repute in city directories indicated a kind of regulatory environment wherein sex workers were obligated to behave properly in public spaces by avoiding certain kinds of dress and eschewing raucousness in the street, like public fighting.

Of course, Knoxville was not the first city to distribute information about bawdy houses and their locations in print. From 1757 to 1795 *Harris's List of Covent Garden Ladies* was a directory of sex workers in London. The publications described the sex workers' physical appearances as well as the conditions of the brothels in which they worked. In the nineteenth century, places like New York City debuted similar means of distributing information about

⁸⁷ Unlabeled archives, McClung Historical Collection. East Tennessee Historical Society. Knoxville City Directories 1890-1914.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

brothel keepers and their locations. The *Gentleman's Companion* first came about in the 1870s and provided similar information about brothel quality.⁸⁹

What is remarkable about Knoxville's city directories, however, is that these were municipal publications. *Harris's List* was not intended for polite society, and neither was the *Gentleman's Companion*. Information about Knoxville's disorderly women was publicly displayed in government publications, indicating a willingness to view brothels as places of work worthy of a listing in a city directory.

Very Disorderly

Even when women were charged for keeping bawdy houses—a euphemistic way of discussing brothels in daily newspapers—authorities were often confused about what city law mandated must be done in order to curb these disorderly women. A public brawl occurred between Donna Hicks (listed at 212 Kentucky Street), charged with keeping a bawdy house, and Mae Jenkins (unlisted in city directories), charged with keeping a disorderly house. The two were charged due to the public nature of their fight, but City Attorney Thomas L. Carty and City Recorder Squire Nelson could not come to an agreement in court as to what kind of fines Hicks and Jenkins should be assigned. Carty thought the fine unreasonable and questioned Nelson's decision; Nelson threw a paperweight at Carty. Because of this “rough house,” Carty appealed Nelson's sentencing, arguing that “he did not now have respect for Recorder Nelson's decisions.”⁹⁰

Other stories like this abound. In 1894, a number of sex workers were arrested for “parading” and fighting. That group of women included Bessie Smith and her mother, Ella

⁸⁹ *A Vest Pocket Guide to Brothels in 19th-Century New York for Gentlemen on the Go*, originally published 1870. Pages reproduced in *New York Times* January 26, 2011.

⁹⁰ “Stop Right There,” *The Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, August 31, 1897.

Smith, both with “the reputation of being notorious prostitutes who are found parading the streets with mother hubbards.”⁹¹ Incidentally, Bessie became more notorious just two years later after she was accused of the shooting death of Joe Metts. Bessie, once known as the “most beautiful woman to be seen” in Friendly Town, was sentenced to twelve years for the crime and then acquitted after appealing her case. In her lurid obituary published in the *Knoxville Sentinel*, Bessie was described as a violent drunk who carried a knife and a gun.⁹² She was publicly assaulted by a man twice, according to other sex workers who knew her. Once, a man named Bud Nelson threw a brick in her face, permanently disfiguring her. The man who killed her threw a soda pop bottle at her face in January of 1905 that “crushed her forehead,” fractured her skull, and led to her death in early March of the same year.⁹³

Bessie Smith was called the “queen and terror” of Friendly Town in the latter half of the 1890s.⁹⁴ But, perhaps no Knoxville brothel-keeper was as infamous as Madam Emma Parham. Madame Em, as she’s often referred to by journalists, was served a warrant to appear in court for her disorderly crimes on the morning of June 29, 1892. Accused of keeping a bawdy house on Clinch Avenue, Parham defiantly resisted the allegations, expressing “her intent of waiving trial and taking it to the Supreme Court if necessary.”⁹⁵

Parham was targeted not because of the bawdy house itself, and not even because she listed her brothel in city directories, but because she was Knoxville’s wealthiest madam in the 1890s and refused to keep her services cloistered in Friendly Town. Parham’s flagrant disregard of social and political conventions is apparent as she abjured the city-approved red-light district,

⁹¹ “Atkins After Them,” *The Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, March 23, 1894.

⁹² “Wild Career at Last Ends,” *The Knoxville Sentinel*, March 3, 1905.

⁹³ “Bessie Smith Assaulted,” *The Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, November 3, 1896.

⁹⁴ “Wild Career at Last Ends,” *The Knoxville Sentinel*, March 3, 1905.

⁹⁵ “Madame Em Parham in Court,” *The Knoxville Sentinel*, June 29, 1892.

or Bowery. She is only one of two madams listed in any of Knoxville's city directories who made her home west of Henley Street or Gay Street, nearer to polite society than any other keeper of a disorderly home would venture.

Parham's case was dismissed quickly, and by 1893, she had returned to her disorderly home on Clinch Avenue where she remained until Rosa Scott bought Madam Em's business in 1901. Scott was "instructed by the chief of police that she would not be permitted to run a house of that character at that place."⁹⁶ In other words, though Parham had beaten the charges of being too disreputable too near Knoxville's middle and upper classes, the city's authorities thought they might be able to reproduce the same charges and secure a conviction when the brothel fell under new management.

Scott also avoided arrest by appealing her case to the Tennessee Supreme Court, where it was ruled that local authorities had no proof of the young women coming to or from the house "in company with men."⁹⁷ Moreover, after appealing the ruling against her for keeping a bawdy house, Scott maintained that the two young women in her home were "forsaken by the world and had drifted astray." Thereby, they "were still entitled to the human right to live somewhere."⁹⁸ Scott adhered to societal conventions and encouraged her tenants, or employees, to do the same. In doing this, they avoided scandal, jail time, and fines.

Reporters invoked Rosa Scott, identifying the 1901 case of *Mayor and Aldermen v. Rosa Scott* as a turning point for Knoxville's red-light district, solidifying its presence. The red-light district in Knoxville "originated in 1900 in an attempt to force Rosa Scott, who was keeping a bawdy house on Clinch avenue" to move from the house because "it was located on the main

⁹⁶ "Rosa Scott Wins Her Case in the Supreme Court," *The Knoxville Sentinel*, October 23, 1901.

⁹⁷ "Rosa Scott Wins Her Case in the Supreme Court," *The Knoxville Sentinel*, October 23, 1901.

⁹⁸ "Of Local Interest," *The Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, October 19, 1901.

thoroughfare between Knoxville and West Knoxville.”⁹⁹ Scott’s case may not have occurred in 1900 as the reporter claimed and it was not the origin point of Knoxville’s red-light district, as Friendly Town was not mentioned in contemporary sources until 1907. Heiskell was right, however, that Scott and Parham were targeted for operating outside of Knoxville’s informal red light district. Creating Friendly Town helped both lawmakers and law enforcement partition portions of the city where sex could be solicited and sold.

Indeed, Knoxville Mayor Samuel Gordon Heiskell who served in mayoral office from 1896-1897, 1900-1901, 1906-1907 and 1910-1915, invoked Rosa Scott’s defense when unhappily conceding the nascent loss of regulatory Friendly Town to vice advocates years later. “The Supreme Court held in the Rosa Scott case that a prostitute had a right to live somewhere,” he announced at a Board of Directors meeting in 1914. He continued, arguing that a prostitute “is not a wild animal or a beast of the field. She is still a human being, entitled to a roof over her head, and the city of Knoxville has no authority to force her to leave the roof over her head.”¹⁰⁰

Between the years of 1890 and 1914, authorities in Knoxville largely avoided prosecuting sex workers unless they were deliberately flouting social conventions. Political elites and authorities largely avoided confrontation with this particular group of laborers in the wake of the nearby Coal Creek War, instead bargaining with working class groups in order to avoid further armed labor insurgencies in the region. This twenty-year period in which sex workers were only arrested if they openly went against codes of dress and behavior was a significant moment in Knoxville’s history, demonstrating how a coalition built upon accommodations between sex workers and officials was accomplished. The breakdown of this relationship, hurried along by Knoxville’s anti-vice crusaders, was yet to come.

⁹⁹ “City Commission Unanimous on its Vice Question Attitude,” *The Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, May 5, 1914.

¹⁰⁰ “City Commission Unanimous on its Vice Question Attitude,” *The Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, May 5, 1914.

Chapter Three: End of an Era

Early twentieth century reform and prohibition movements fundamentally changed the lives of all sex workers in Knoxville. Almost fifteen years after the Coal Creek War uprising, moral uplift reformers in the city of Knoxville were agitating for change. Organizations like the Anti-Vice Commission sought to reduce vice and crime in the city and break up the regulated red-light district and wholly prohibit prostitution altogether. Activists like Lizzie Crozier French, whose effigy is cast in bronze in Knoxville's main square, sought to improve the lives of white women. The debate between regulation and prohibition raged as Knoxville lawmakers, including the mayor, argued that regulation of sex work was more effective in preventing vice than full prohibition.

The nation itself had begun to turn away from vice. Knoxville was one of the last liquor refuges in the state of Tennessee when it finally succumbed to liquor prohibition by 1914. The influence of women's societies, church groups, and the Anti-Vice Commission did not eliminate vice from Knoxville. However, these groups did seek to break up existing regulatory patterns, spreading sex workers across the city and changing how Knoxville's sex workers plied their trade forever.

These reform movements did not understand sex work as labor. Rather, they saw white female sex workers as women who could be saved. Meanwhile, Knoxville lawmakers publicly lamented the removal of a red-light district and disdained groups like the Anti-Vice Commission at meetings and in print. Regardless, the long leash that had been extended to Knoxville's sex workers was removed as arrests on charges of prostitution alone returned.

Regulation and Reform

Perhaps no person epitomized Knoxville's reform crusades in the early twentieth century more than Lizzie Crozier French. French was a fixture on the *Knoxville Weekly Sentinel's* "Happenings in Social Circles" page. One column even referenced French hosting "Mrs. Frances H. Burnett Townsend, of Washington." British-born novelist Frances Hodgson Burnett, author of classics like 1911's *The Secret Garden*, lived in Knoxville for more than a decade following the Civil War. Once moving from the city, she maintained contact with French, though maintaining such a friendship with a well-bred white Southern woman may have seemed scandalous to other Knoxville elites as Burnett married a man a decade younger than her after a divorce.¹⁰¹

French was as politically active as a woman of her status and time could have possibly been. This civic spirit could perhaps be attributed to her father. An attorney by trade, John Hervey Crozier served as a Tennessee State Representative representing Knox County. He also served in the United States House of Representatives from 1845 to 1849. Before her father's death in 1889, French had married William Baxter French in 1872. When he died eighteen months later, she never remarried. Her status as a widow would allow her the freedom to become a champion of woman suffrage. Lizzie networked her way through the grapevine of a myriad of women's clubs and moral uplift organizations. She founded the second woman suffrage society in the state of Tennessee in 1910 and was named head of the state's Women's Christian Temperance Union in 1891.¹⁰² French was also the first woman to run for a Knoxville city council position, though she ultimately lost the election.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ "Society Personals," *The Weekly Sentinel*, April 16, 1904; "Society Personals," *The Weekly Sentinel*, April 11, 1904; "Mrs. Perkins to Entertain Nicholson Art League," *The Weekly Sentinel*, May 18, 1907; "Course of Ibsen Lectures to be Given by Miss Crozier," *The Weekly Sentinel*, November 7, 1908.

¹⁰² "Happenings Here Just Twenty Years Ago," *Knoxville Sentinel*, February 28, 1911.

¹⁰³ Newspaper clipping: "With 71 Candles on Birthday Cake Mrs. L. Crozier French Reminisces on the Past." *Knoxville Sentinel*. May 28, 1922. Lizzie Crozier French Scrapbook, 14. McClung Historical Collection.

By the time Lizzie Crozier French died in 1926, she had become Knoxville's symbol of the Progressive Movement politics that dominated discourse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. French championed white women's education. Her sisters Mary Hume Crozier and Lucy Graham Crozier, who often wrote editorials espousing her politics in Southern newspapers using her husband's initials as a pseudonym, worked alongside her in order to reopen the once-defunct East Tennessee Female Institute. French also supported women laborers, establishing the Woman's Educational and Industrial Union in 1890. To her credit, French also vehemently opposed the convict labor leasing system and sought to provide support to needy women during periods of labor unrest, like the Coal Creek War.

Throughout her life, French was a thorn in the side of Knoxville lawmakers who sought to ease vice restrictions against sex workers. In 1914 she appeared before the city commission disputing "the theory of segregation of vice, and urged the dissipation of the evil." In particular, French was riled by a city commission resolution that instructed "the police of the city 'not to pursue or prosecute prostitutes, no matter in what section, of the city they may be, unless they are engaged in some independent violation of the law, such as profanity, drunkenness, fighting or any of the penalties known to the law.'" French's scrapbooks reveal articles that she saved wherein she served as "the authorized representative of thirty-three women's organizations of Knoxville," including the Anti-Vice Commission.¹⁰⁴

The Anti-Vice Commission

Perhaps the most substantial form of protest against vice in Knoxville was the creation of the city's Anti-Vice Commission. Made up mostly of local clergy, the Anti-Vice Commission sought broadly to eliminate vice in Knoxville. Their specific goal, however, was to end the city's

¹⁰⁴ Newspaper clipping: 'Anti-Vice Leaguers Against Segregation.' *Knoxville Journal Tribune*. May 6, 1914. Lizzie Crozier French Scrapbook, 3. McClung Historical Collection.

red-light district, whether formal or informal, and “close all brothels.”¹⁰⁵ Sometimes called the Anti-Vice League by local newspapers, the group ultimately only somewhat accomplished their objective after building upon decades of other previous anti-vice campaigns, like temperance.

This organization was built upon the growing conservatism that began in the mid-aughts and endured as East Tennessee was “swept into the national economy.”¹⁰⁶ Civic-minded Knoxville elites often joined groups like the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, the Anti-Saloon League, and the Anti-Vice Commission joined with fundamentalist Christian churches and the Republican Party.

The case for temperance had been building slowly in Tennessee as the passing of tentative laws slowly shut down legal liquor sales. In 1877, The Tennessee General Assembly passed the Four Mile Law, making it illegal to sell alcohol within four miles of a school, but the law only applied to certain rural areas. By 1907, the law’s jurisdiction expanded to all but a few major cities. By the end of 1907, Knoxville was effectively dry, though the laws were not heavily enforced as the city’s lawmakers favored regulation over prohibition for liquor laws as well as sex work.

Knoxville’s elected officials were not keen on reform efforts and were hesitant to promote full-scale prohibition of any vice. In city meetings, Mayor Heiskell emphasized that prohibition was not effective. Any “law that was not sustained by the sentiment of the people could not be properly enforced,” he argued. Moreover, he pleaded to prohibitionists, saloon taxes made up a major source of funding for Knoxville’s public education. He demonstrated that “the city would lose at one blow over \$33,000 in privilege taxes if saloons were abolished” and argued “there was no way of making that up just at this time, except by raising assessments at

¹⁰⁵ “He’s Ready to Co-Operate” *The Journal and Tribune*, June 15, 1913.

¹⁰⁶ Wheeler, 33.

once.”¹⁰⁷ The eradication of liquor in Knoxville could prove disastrous for the city’s poor white and African American schoolchildren. In other city commission meetings, Mayor Heiskell had urged the necessity of a regulated red-light district. In all addresses he maintained that it is easier to curtail vice when that vice is collected in one specific area. Once again, however, moral uplift reformers prevailed over Heiskell’s attempted regulation.

On March 1, 1914, Tennessee’s first Nuisance Laws went into effect. The laws, passed in October of 1913, were meant to control and abate nuisances throughout the state. This legislation was surprisingly controversial. Section One of the Nuisance Act prohibited the “conducting, maintaining, carrying on, or engaging in the sale of intoxicating liquors, the keeping, maintaining or conducting bawdy or assignation houses, and the conducting, operating, keeping, running, or maintaining gambling houses.”¹⁰⁸ At first glance, the prohibition of these acts and activities seems like a victory for Knoxville’s anti-vice reformers. Upon further reading however, the rest of the act provides no specific punishment for any of these acts. Indeed, the act does not even delineate whether these charges are to be prosecuted in chancery, circuit, or criminal courts. Moreover, “the general reputation of the place where the nuisance is alleged to exist,” read the act, “shall be admissible for the purposes of providing or tending to prove the existence of such nuisance.”¹⁰⁹ In other words, this act did not legitimately break up red-light districts. If nuisances are criminalized not specifically by the act itself but rather by the relative appropriateness of the act for the space in which it occurs, purveyors of vice could merely appeal their charges to the Tennessee Supreme Court, much like Emma Parham and Rosa Scott. Sex workers could argue

¹⁰⁷ “Business Men Favored Regulation of Saloon,” *Knoxville Sentinel*, February 9, 1907.

¹⁰⁸ “‘Nuisance Bill’ Will Be Effective March 1,” *Knoxville Sentinel*, October 24, 1913.

¹⁰⁹ “‘Nuisance Bill’ Will Be Effective March 1,” *Knoxville Sentinel*, October 24, 1913.

that they operated within a specifically designated space for vice, and within that space they could perform the paid labor of sex work.

It was in this milieu of lax legislation that activists from the Anti-Vice Commission sought to “clean out the vice district in Knoxville entirely and close all brothels.”¹¹⁰ The Anti-Vice Commission was made up of local moral uplift reformers and clergymen concerned with the city’s soul. They were all white. The men were almost all either reverends or doctors, and the women often occupied appropriate societal positions for their gender, such as other women’s organizations. In explosive city commission meetings, the group accused the five city commissioners and Mayor Heiskell of being soft on crime, leading to the downfall of Knoxville’s society. One member of the Anti-Vice Commission, Reverend H. B. Smith, bizarrely declared that he had visited red-light districts for research purposes “in Knoxville and in all parts of the world almost even to Cairo.”¹¹¹ For these reasons, according to Smith, he was an expert on sex work and red-light districts, and the societal ills they created in cities around the world.

Heiskell, for his part, did not like the Anti-Vice Commission and accused them of targeting desperate women, sex workers, for political gain. In an impassioned speech at a city commission meeting, he said to members of the Anti-Vice Commission “Your movement is unmitigated humbuggery and you are up here to further a political scheme, rather than on moral grounds and your motives are not sincere.” Heiskell turned their supposed moral authority against them, continuing, “When you take prostitutes into your homes and care for them as you said you would do in published statements, you will show that your efforts are bona fide and

¹¹⁰ “He’s Ready to Co-Operate” *The Journal and Tribune*, June 15, 1913.

¹¹¹ “Bold Accusations and Vehement Denials,” *The Journal and Tribune*, June 14, 1913.

every man in the city will rally to your support.”¹¹² He continued to vehemently protest against the Anti-Vice Commission’s true intentions, rebutting their objections throughout the meeting.

Heiskell had indeed called the Commission on its bluff. Another city commissioner, Hill, seemed to join in, acknowledging that “There could be no prostitute alone, and yet the movement outlined was wholly against the unfortunate woman instead of the men equally to blame.

Opposition to protected vice was expressed,” Hill continued, and stressed that he was “for anything that would better society.”¹¹³ Though Heiskell’s outburst made the *Journal and Tribune*’s highlights of the year 1913, the Anti-Vice Commission nonetheless spelled the end of Knoxville’s official red-light district.¹¹⁴

Breaking Truces

The anti-vice movement in the state of Tennessee had been growing since the advent of the state’s Four Mile Laws passed in 1877. Thirty years later, in 1907, Knoxville was growing increasingly drier. As ideas about prohibition of liquor picked up steam, so did ideas about prohibition of prostitution. The city’s leaders, like Heiskell, had managed to hold on to an uneasy truce for several years, encouraging regulation of sex work both in formal and informal red-light districts. However, it had been a long time since the Coal Creek War. Twenty years on from the hanging of Richard Drummond, Knoxville’s no longer feared labor uprisings sparked by bawdy house brawls. Instead, they feared both real and imagined violence that sprang from informal economy sectors like Friendly Town.

As a result of the nuisance law, Tennessee Governor Ben W. Hooper crowed in a published speech in 1915, “there are no open saloons in Knoxville.”¹¹⁵ By 1916, Knoxville’s

¹¹² “Bold Accusations and Vehement Denials,” *The Journal and Tribune*, June 14, 1913.

¹¹³ “Bold Accusations and Vehement Denials,” *The Journal and Tribune*, June 14, 1913.

¹¹⁴ “Local Happenings of the Year 1913,” *The Journal and Tribune*, December 30, 1913.

¹¹⁵ “Gov. Hooper Talks to the Legislature of Law Enforcement,” *The Journal and Tribune*, January 7, 1915.

brothel keepers could be arrested on charges of prostitution alone, despite the passing of the same resolution in 1914 that endorsed refraining from prosecuting sex workers unless they were engaged in egregious crimes, like public fighting. Charged under the new nuisance laws, punishments typically included fines between \$25 and \$50 and occasional sentencing to a workhouse.¹¹⁶

The uneasy truce between Knoxville lawmakers and sex workers had fundamentally changed. Mayor Heiskell and other city leaders' goals of regulation rather than prohibition had been dashed. Instead, Knoxville's sex workers spread beyond the limits of Central Avenue. Mayor Heiskell placed the blame of vice's expansion throughout the city squarely upon the shoulders of the Anti-Vice Commission, writing "the breaking up of this district has scattered the prostitutes over the city, and the responsibility for this condition lies upon the shoulders of the men who started the crusade." Heiskell continued that the commission was also responsible for "scattering venereal diseases" among men throughout the city.¹¹⁷ Regardless of who was to blame, Knoxville would never contain its sex workers and position them as laborers in municipal publications again.

¹¹⁶ "For Violation of Injunction," *The Journal and Tribune*, April 30, 1916.

¹¹⁷ "Prostitutes Everywhere," *The Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, May 5, 1914.

Conclusion

By the time James Agee and his mother and father and aunts and uncles were laying out quilts in the yard of their Highland Avenue home in 1915, the evidence for women laboring openly as sex workers in the city of Knoxville slowly dissipated. City directories no longer directly or indirectly list brothels, bordellos, or bawdy houses for curious patrons. By the end of 1913, “Friendly Town” off of Central Avenue became less and less friendly as police increased their presence and began arresting more and more women for keeping bawdy houses. When miners at Coal Creek in nearby Anderson County began a prolonged armed labor revolt in 1890, East Tennesseans and Knoxvilleans in particular were forced to think critically about how to control disorderly laboring populations. Indeed, journalists publicly warned against inciting future labor riots and class conflict.

Understanding the New South in a labor context is key. For a city like Knoxville that became rapidly obsessed with industrialization, the New South provided opportunities. During this time Knoxville was “in a perfect position to take advantage of the New South Movement” and the city had “rail connections, natural resources...and a potential labor pool in the rural hinterland.”¹¹⁸ It was this potential labor pool, however, that frightened elite Knoxvilleans into accepting modes of labor that promoted lifestyles not coherent with traditional Southern American values in order to avoid another labor uprising.

This distrust of law enforcement to keep the peace combined with the impulse to maintain class status quo led to a brief respite in the outlawing of sex work. Indeed, instead of criminalizing bawdy houses, brothels, bordellos, or even the sex workers themselves, Knoxville’s laws changed to indict behaviors and performances rather than actions. The

¹¹⁸ Wheeler, 8.

criminalization of Mother Hubbard dresses is one example of this change of performative behavioral monitoring rather than a widespread civic desire for genuine moral uplift.

Admittedly, organizations like the Anti-Vice Commission and figures like Lizzie Crozier French were interested in improving the lives of white women to some extent. They saw sex workers not as bold-faced criminals bent on moral turpitude, but rather as young girls who had been forced into a kind of white slavery by bad men, bad decisions, and bad liquor. Members of Knoxville's reform organizations saw themselves as moral turpentine, scrubbing the city's streets and providing a better future for young white women.

The two-decade period in which Knoxville attempted to regulate its sex workers following the Coal Creek War led Knoxvillians to partake in a particular kind of labor awareness. This awareness led to the public debate and discussion of sex work as either a regulated industry or as a wholly prohibited criminal enterprise. These debates about the ethics of sex work persist into the modern day as attitudes surrounding sex and agency shift and grow. By engaging in a historically informed perspective, we may be able to draw conclusions about contemporary beliefs surrounding sex work.

Goodbye Friendly Town

The end of Friendly Town did not spell the end of the sex work enterprise in Knoxville. The Anti-Vice Commission's crusade ensured the end of Knoxville's pseudo red-light district. This did not mean that sex work ceased in the city; rather, women were increasingly prosecuted on prostitution charges after the end of this twenty year period. Once liquor was prohibited, patrons had little cause to frequent Friendly Town establishments. Sex work spread throughout the increasingly expanding city and never again was so tightly regulated or so easily ignored by law enforcement.

Perhaps the most famous sex worker in Knoxville's history is Hazel Davidson, who began plying her trade over thirty years after the city's madams could be found in directories alongside advertisements for Kern's white bread. Hazel, a native of Strawberry Plains, Tennessee, primarily worked in West Knoxville out of apartment complexes with just a few "girls." Hazel herself was the main attraction, having worked as a model after graduating from Carson-Newman College (now University).

Davidson initially became notorious in Knoxville after filing for divorce from her second husband just seventeen days after the wedding.¹¹⁹ Much like in the 1880s, reports of police corruption for failing to properly prosecute Davidson proliferated throughout the 1950s and 60s. Later, she was accused of involvement in the stabbing death of Rose Busch, wife of jeweler Harry Busch, in the Busch's luxe Sequoyah Hills home. Davidson was never formally charged.

What set the treatment of Hazel apart from her Friendly Town counterparts besides her move to the city's more suburban locations was her portrayal and treatment in local news. Though the city's New South era sex workers had been treated with disdain, they were also recognized as workers, if workers of vice. Hazel Davidson, meanwhile, was treated as a "playgirl," and emphasis was placed on the celebrities she partied with, like Bob Hope and Perry Como.¹²⁰

When contrasted with reporters' impressions of Emma Parham and Rosa Scott, this seems like a positively cushy portrayal. However, Parham and Scott were at least viewed as workers in the eyes of the state. By contesting the charges against them at the Supreme Court level, Parham and Scott could indicate their status as laborers and employers. Though debates

¹¹⁹ "Lounsberry, Secretary Married" *The Knoxville Journal*, November 5, 1963.

¹²⁰ Barbara Aston-Wash, "Hazel Davidson" *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, September 5, 1978.

about regulation or prohibition of sex work have persisted, portrayal of sex workers continues to vary in popular imagination.

Compromise and Consequences

Though historians in the mid-twentieth century were initially hesitant to write about the indelicate institution of sex work, the discursive shift that occurred in the early 1990s empowered historians to produce a variety of works that placed sex workers within their particular cultural context. Scholars argued that they could explain economic, cultural, and political realities by analyzing the choices sex workers made, however limited those may have been.

Recently, historians have flirted with positioning sex workers as laborers. They attempt to analyze sex work not through the lens of social history, but through the lens of labor history. These recent studies written by historians of the United States have only, at this point, focused on large Northern urban centers. However, integrating developing ideas of sex workers as laborers within the context of the unique historiography of Southern women's labor has the potential to create new opportunities for study among historians of both fields. Moreover, this work seeks to expose new stories and new ways of understanding labor in the South.

Beginning to bridge the gap between these two fields by situating Southern women sex workers as Southern women laborers could promote envisioning sex workers as part of an informal labor economy similar to other studies on the urban North. The introduction of informal labor economy analysis within the context of Southern labor history has the potential to invigorate both fields, but could especially introduce new historical problems, creating new opportunities for study.

Understanding Knoxville's attempted regulation of sex workers within the context of labor can help us understand how labor movements have far-reaching consequences for all workers. Without the looming specter of the Coal Creek War, Knoxville's sex workers would perhaps not have enjoyed the relative freedom of city directories and laissez-faire law enforcement. Though many assume that debates that pit regulation of sex work versus prohibition of sex work are modern, these have been constant in Northern urban spaces, and this investigation proves that this discourse prevailed in small Southern cities like Knoxville over a century ago.

Knoxville's awareness led to a public debate and discussion of the potential regulation of sex work rather than criminalization. This discursive turn surrounding the ethics of sex work persists even now as historians, sociologists, philosophers, and legal scholars attempt to identify the limits of sex workers' agency and ability to make informed, uncoerced choices with regard to legalization and the problems of exploitation of sex workers with regard to prohibition. This historical moment can help us understand how elite factors mitigate class conflict by easing up on societal rules or by making changes to those rules. Moreover, understanding that these debates were occurring throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries offers a historically informed perspective that may help us to make sense of contemporary concerns surrounding sex work and its labor capacity.

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