Contents

A Flight to Freedom: A True Story of the Underground Railroad in Illinois
Carol Pirtle

“Notorious Home of Harlotry”: Regulating Prostitution in the Ohio Valley, 1850-1860
Anita Ashendel

Eastern Kentucky and the War on Poverty: Grass-roots Activism, Regional Politics, and Creative Federalism in the Appalachian South during the 1960s
Margaret Ripley Wolfe

Reviews

Letter to the Editors

Upcoming Events
Contributors


Anita Ashendel is currently Visiting Assistant Professor of History at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis.

Margaret Ripley Wolfe is the Senior Research Professor in History at East Tennessee State University. She is the author of numerous publications, including *Daughters of Canaan: A Saga of Southern Women*, and serves as the general editor of “Women in Southern Culture,” a series published by The University Press of Kentucky. Currently she is completing a biography of Harry M. Caudill.
“Notorious Home of Harlotry”:  
Regulating Prostitution in the  
Ohio Valley, 1850-1860

ANITA ASHENDEL

On March 4, 1860, Julia Dean’s brothel—located in Louisville’s first ward and home to Dean and six other women—teemed with customers even though it was a Sunday night. A prostitute from another house, seventeen-year-old Ann Clarkson, and her customer, Frank Holmes, attempted to enter the brothel, but when no one answered their knock at the door, Clarkson tapped on a window and caught the attention of Elizabeth French. Ann Clarkson asked to be admitted, but French explained that the parlor was full and therefore she and Holmes would have to go elsewhere. Clarkson then feign a need to visit the backyard—perhaps to visit the privy—so Dean instructed French to admit them.¹

According to her statement given to the police, Elizabeth French had noticed that Clarkson carried a gun under her apron. Fearing that the drunken Holmes might take the gun and “do some harm,” she warned the other prostitute to keep it away from him. But Clarkson responded oddly, saying that she would be “sorry if he didn’t,” and that should have alerted French to impending trouble. Entering the house from the backyard, Holmes—who by now had the gun in his possession—“tried to raise a quarrel” with a “cross-eyed” man, and succeeded in scaring him out of the parlor. He then shook hands with several other men before sitting on a sofa next to Alice McDonald, a nineteen-year-old prostitute. At that point, Holmes “put his left hand on her left shoulder, put the pistol in her side, and fired,” wounding her. In the commotion that followed, Clarkson hid the weapon under a table. At the trial that followed, two men testified that Holmes did not intentionally shoot McDonald, but that the gun had been fired by mistake. The outcome of this trial remains unknown.²

Historian Joel Best has argued that the study of prostitution can reveal much about the “limited choices available to women in patriarchal society,” as well as the culture of bachelorhood that flourished in early nineteenth century America and “the more general threat of urban disorder” in any time period. For the Ohio Valley between 1850 and 1860, an examination of the lives of Julia Dean, Ann Clarkson, Elizabeth French, and other prostitutes makes it possible to see Best’s themes work themselves out in specific examples. For instance, historians have extensively documented what Best has
described as a culture of bachelorhood—or “sporting male culture”—for New York City before the Civil War. This same culture appeared in the growing commercial centers of the Ohio Valley, carried there by the large number of male clerks who kept both western businesses and western brothels in operation. A look at the lives of prostitutes in Louisville and Cincinnati also demonstrates, as Best has suggested, the ways in which citizens attempted to ease “urban disorder” by regulating the place of prostitutes in local society. Prostitutes, though not necessarily a “civilizing” influence on these growing towns as has been suggested for the trans-Mississippi West, did inspire middle class and upper class efforts to regulate their presence. By the 1850s, these persistent citizens wanted to move their towns beyond mere commercial growth and to establish their values—self-control and domesticity especially—as dominant in the towns of the Ohio Valley. In other words, the commercial focus of the towns had been settled, and the question that now took priority focused on how exactly people would live their lives amidst commercial success.3

I n the 1850s, this question arose in Cincinnati and Louisville especially because they had grown rapidly in population during the previous two decades, attracting large numbers of both native-born and foreign-born immigrants. Cincinnati’s population, for example, reached 46,388 in 1840; 115,435 in 1850; and 161,044 in 1860. And Louisville grew at the same pace, from 21,210 citizens in 1840 to 43,194 in 1850, and to 69,750 by 1860. Riots between native born citizens and German immigrants in Louisville and Cincinnati in the 1850s serve as evidence of the tumultuous characters of two cities which had grown so quickly.4 Even more than tensions between ethnic groups, however, the presence of women who openly violated prevailing gender roles in Cincinnati and Louisville seemed to middle class citizens to demonstrate a lack of individual self control among some local residents. Specifically, prostitutes had to be brought under control and, if not put out of business, then at least eliminated from public view so that they did not openly flaunt the values—purity, domesticity, and self-control—of the new middle class based social order. According to historians Andrew R.L. Cayton and Peter Onuf, the story of the Middle West is the story of “a vigor-
ous, enterprising middle class.” This look at prostitution will show just one part of the efforts of those middle class citizens to shape all parts of society in the Ohio Valley in their own image.⁴

Ohio Valley census takers routinely noted the presence of any “house of ill-fame,” “assignation house,” or “brothel” as they surveyed their towns in 1850 and 1860. In general, a house of ill-fame was a brothel, but the owner of an assignation house rented rooms overnight or by the hour to prostitutes or illicit lovers. Some madams or “mistresses” of these houses owned property worth thousands of dollars—presumably the house from which they worked. Most census takers labeled the inmates of these houses as prostitutes although they also used a variety of euphemisms including “woman of the town,” “seraglio,” “courtesan,” “sporting lady,” or even “doubtful.”⁵ A simple “counting” of prostitutes taken in Cincinnati in 1858 found that most houses of prostitution were clustered in the fourteenth and sixth wards and that 823 prostitutes lived in 57 different “houses of ill-fame” and 67 “houses of assignation.” The report estimated that 200 prostitutes had not been accounted for, bringing the total to 1023 in a city of “at least 225,000 inhabitants,” although it is quite possible that the total population was exaggerated since the 1850 census reported only 115,435 inhabitants in Cincinnati. Similarly in 1856, the Chief of Police in Louisville reported seventy-nine “Houses of Prostitution” operating in that city, along with thirty-nine “Houses of Assignation,” 214 “public prostitutes,” ninety-three “Private Prostitutes,” and sixty “kept mistresses.” And this in a city with an estimated population of 70,000 citizens (again higher than census figures).⁷

Julia Dean’s brothel provides a look inside one of those houses of ill-fame in Louisville. Although owned by only a moderately affluent prostitute, Dean’s house was unusual in Louisville because it housed an especially large number of prostitutes, six in all, and those prostitutes were particularly young, mostly fifteen to twenty years of age. Dean herself was only twenty-five years old. Other brothels in the neighborhood sheltered fewer prostitutes who ranged in age from their early to middle twenties. All of these women gave the immediate geographic area as their place of birth. Dean also possessed more property—both real and personal—than other local brothel owners. Her house, located in a neighborhood where brothels mixed with the homes of mostly German-born merchants and artisans, was valued at $2,000 in the 1860 census—almost twice that of any other brothel in the area and nearly as much as nearby family homes. With $600 of personal property—three to four times that reported for other brothel owners—Dean’s parlor was probably outfitted with sofas, parlor tables, and other fine furniture.⁸

Unfortunately, no guidebook to antebellum Louisville brothels existed to assist potential customers as was the case in New York City. Still, it is likely that Dean’s house drew a large clientele because of the youth of the prostitutes
who lived there and the more refined environment it provided to customers, an oblique but telling indicator of the growing wealth of Louisville’s male citizens. Moreover, the fact that the prostitutes in Dean’s house entertained men in a parlor, in addition to their rooms, indicates a certain level of sophistication not shared by competing brothels. Ordinarily, men and women engaged in conversation and had drinks with each other, while other men socialized among themselves and perhaps talked business. The crowded parlor on the Sunday night when Alice McDonald was wounded lends further credibility to Dean’s probable position as a prostitute of a “better sort,” one that did a great deal of business with a wealthy and prominent local clientele and one that probably turned a larger profit than others. In short, both locals and men from out of town not only transacted a certain business with the women in Dean’s brothel, they also conducted legitimate transactions with other men in the parlors of well known brothels. Bustling commercial centers in the Ohio Valley were open to both kinds of business.

But Frank Holmes and Ann Clarkson appear to have been out of their element at Dean’s brothel. Holmes is listed in the 1860 census as a watchman, an occupation not usually associated with the clients of an upper tier brothel. Yet his presence in Dean’s brothel perhaps should not be entirely surprising. According to the census, he lived with his father who was the “keeper of the workhouse,” a place where the younger man would certainly be able to form associations with prostitutes on a regular basis. And Clarkson is listed as living with another prostitute who was in a financial situation a good deal less affluent than Dean’s. Dean apparently did not want Holmes and Clarkson in the house, perhaps because she associated them with a lower class of people in Louisville who might disrupt the normally quiet operations of her brothel.

Dean’s apparent fears were not unreasonable. Ohio Valley towns experienced high levels of violence during this decade, as did most rapidly growing urban areas in mid-nineteenth century America. Contemporaries often blamed the violence on transients or on various ethnic groups, as in the 1850s riots in Louisville and Cincinnati where Know Nothings attacked German immigrants. The cause for violence in brothels, however, was more likely due to loose social controls over the towns’ young, male inhabitants, including those in the middle and upper classes such as those who patronized Julia Dean’s establishment. Men who moved west to pursue their dreams in nineteenth century America often acted on impulse and without regard for social or moral constraints. Without the oversight of a father or a paternalistic employer, they sometimes engaged after working hours in activities that were either criminal or at least morally questionable. It was just this lack of control, for example, that fueled revivals in Rochester, New York, in the 1820s and 1830s as the Erie Canal led many young and ungovernable men to the west.
Wheeling, up river from Louisville and Cincinnati, also acquired a reputation for chaos for similar reasons.

In 1850, Louisville was home to 724 male clerks. These men, seventy-five per cent native born and mostly in their mid-twenties, lived near each other in the business district of the city, usually at their places of business. And according to historian Alexander Burckin, they were gaining wealth by 1860. Consequently, they had more money to spend at brothels and taverns, both meeting places for men after working hours. These young men actively engaged in a sporting male culture which has been described by historian Timothy Gilfoyle as one that accepted or perhaps encouraged “male sexual aggressiveness and promiscuity” as well as violent games such as boxing and other “blood sports.” Gilfoyle theorizes that this culture was constructed in part in opposition to the feminine controlled and newly created middle class world of home and hearth. As marriage to a “respectable” woman was delayed and bachelorhood became an alternative way of life, men from all backgrounds forged a new way of interacting within and beyond their places of business. Gilfoyle argues that a “large, transient male population,” economic forces that led to marriage for “economic reasons” rather than love, new “courtship habits and customs,” and the “enhanced power of women within marriage” led to the development of this new culture. These factors were, of course, all present in the Ohio Valley. References to many a “sporting man” and “sporting lady” in the Indianapolis census indicate that the lifestyle was present and well known by such names in the West by mid-century.13

According to middle class opinion, prostitutes themselves invited violence and crime by their very existence, and without them, young men would not find themselves in such predicaments.14 Consider, for example, the death of Cincinnati prostitute, Kate Beareau. Beareau, who had a husband and child in New Orleans, originally had worked as a servant in a local brothel but then turned to prostitution for larger financial rewards. In 1858, Beareau was stabbed to death by Charles Cook at Caroline Davis’s brothel on Lodge Street. Cook’s friend, William Seiter, had been in an argument with Beareau when Cook stepped into the fray and stabbed her. (She had apparently refused to accept one of the men as a client and suggested that

Cincinnati Home for the Friendless

The "Cincinnati Home for the Friendless, and Female Guardian Society was projected in 1834, by a few ladies who felt the need of some plan of reform for fallen women. Cincinnati Historical Society Library, Cincinnati Museum Center

SPRING 2003
he visit his sister instead!) Many other people in the house witnessed the altercation including William Swift, a companion of the other two men. According to a newspaper report, all three men were either the sons of Cincinnati merchants or employed by them. And a city directory indicates all three lived in boardinghouses in Cincinnati. These were young men who apparently had parents nearby and supposedly had reason to act with self-control, but who still engaged in violent acts despite any social constraints imposed by the local community. In another such incident, Abraham Seigle stole women's clothing, jewelry, and other items from wholesalers by saying he was employed by A&I Wolf and Co., although he had been fired from the store nearly two months earlier. A newspaper report suggested that he took the clothing to pay prostitutes for their services and blamed the "influence of these depraved women" for his "lapse from honesty." But the most dangerous sporting man also could be a prostitute's husband. Joseph Beiter's wife, a prostitute who kept a room at a "doggery" on Fourth Street in Cincinnati, was allegedly beaten by her husband for not bringing in enough money. For this, he had to give a bond of $1000 for a year of good behavior.

Other scattered reports of violence toward prostitutes in the Ohio Valley suggest that they made easy targets for men outside the confines of a brothel. One man, for example, shot a Lexington prostitute because she had "cohabited" with a black man the previous evening. The husband of a Cincinnati prostitute beat her one evening because she had not brought in enough money that day. And another Cincinnati man who attempted to "cowhide" a prostitute was fined thirty-six dollars and costs, but the court fined the woman two hundred dollars for "provoking a breach of the peace." Finally, David Moore shot "Frances Horrocks alias Frances Williams alias Susan Losy" on Cincinnati's Fourth Street for reasons unknown. The prostitute, who the Cincinnati Gazette noted had been in the trade
since the age of fifteen, was expected to recover.¹⁸

Prostitutes, however, also sometimes attacked each other, much of the violence probably originating in competition for customers. In 1860, for example, Julia Dean and Elizabeth French were again in the Louisville news, having been “arraigned for drunkenness and disorderly conduct” on June 5. The previous night they had used “very profane language” during a fight on Market Street at the home of their washerwoman, and during the course of the fight French cut Dean with a knife. Dean then grabbed an ax and went after French. Somehow, the washerwoman’s son kept Dean out of the house while French cowered inside. Other historians have noted similar, if less potentially lethal, arguments between prostitutes over articles of clothing. Since the altercation between Dean and French took place at the washerwoman’s home, it is possible that clothing, an essential aspect of attracting customers, was the trouble. That certainly was the case when another Louisville prostitute, Mary Davis, damaged the clothing of Mary Kecch (presumably another prostitute) at the home of their washerwoman, Maria Knight. Similarly, an altercation between Margaret Edwards and Rose Stewart, also in Louisville, resulted in a torn dress apparently because Edwards “blackguarded” Stewart on the street. Other altercations between washerwomen and prostitutes and between prostitutes in other cities also involved damage to clothing.¹⁹ Finally, although Julia Dean did not harm French during her ax attack, other prostitutes staged successful attacks against their peers. Mary Frick stabbed Elizabeth Johnson with a Spanish dirk at the National Theatre in Cincinnati. Philopena Potts stabbed Ann Finnigan because of a reportedly slanderous statement. Alice Nice and Mary Fuller used a bowie knife to stab Elizabeth Irwin, who later died of the wound, in the abdomen. And Cincinnati prostitutes Sophy Irvin, Catherine Sparks, Elizabeth Palmer, and Margaret Brashears entertained theatergoers in the third tier by “engaging in a ‘free fight.’”²⁰

Newspapers also told of prostitutes who attacked customers, as when a prostitute described as “former friend” of Robert Glenn stabbed him after he grabbed her on Cincinnati’s Fifth Street. Similarly, Frederick Richards was attacked and robbed when he spent the night at a Louisville brothel with either Elizabeth Stewart, Elizabeth French (perhaps the same Elizabeth French), or Julie Standford. Around eleven that night, one of the three women, his companion for the evening, let the other two women into the room where they threatened his naked body with a hot poker and tried to throw his pants into the fire. In the process, they lifted eighty-six dollars from him, perhaps an attempt to collect an “extra” fee.²¹ Finally, Ohio Valley newspapers recounted how prostitution itself often began with an act of violence in the process of seducing girls into the trade. The Louisville Daily Courier, for example, told the story of how Henry McKinney persuaded a New Albany girl to move across the river to Louisville by promising
that his sister would train her as a milliner. In reality, the sister was a prostitute, and McKinney raped the girl to prevent her from returning to New Albany and thereby condemned her to a life of prostitution. Women in Cincinnati also were accused of luring girls as young as twelve into the life. There a woman was sent to prison for hiring girls supposedly to do housework and then “inducing them to indulge in the worst of conduct.”

The violence and disarray in the lives of Ohio Valley prostitutes would eventually be brought under some control merely by exposure in the newspapers. An 1849 issue of the *Indianapolis Locomotive*, for example, reported a “general melee and riot” at Mrs. Tucker’s brothel, including many particulars of the conflict but failing to mention the names of the men involved. Indeed the editor stated that the “prosecutor deserves credit for the delicacy with which he handles these cases, as he prevents exposures that would be unpleasant.” Nonetheless, the activities of the men did come under some scrutiny by the local prosecutor as a result of the press reports. In the late 1850s, however, at least one Ohio Valley newspaper adopted a different approach to reporting on the sex trade by publicly disclosing the names of prostitutes’ clients. In 1857, the *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* published the names of men found at a particularly “notorious home of harlotry whose inmates have for a long time outraged the neighborhood by their daily rioting.” The purpose of such exposure was not only to shame the men but also to prevent them from returning to the brothel and, hopefully, to close the house after the madam’s profits declined.

By the time the *Gazette* began its crusade, Cincinnati had devised a criminal code that attempted to limit the local sex trade to a confined district and to punish madams and prostitutes for pursuing their line of business. This crackdown on brothels came not coincidentally at the same time that an increasing number of single women lived in boarding houses, and when female boarding schools opened for business. The *Daily Cincinnati Gazette* even suggested that the owners of houses of prostitution ought to be prosecuted so that “respectable” businesses would not be mistaken for brothels. Two years earlier, a house “occupied by females of questionable reputation was attacked by a crowd of men, and completely riddled with stones and other missiles.” Perhaps this attack led “respectable” establishments to worry about the safety and well being of the women who lived there. The new regulations for sex traders included larger fines and longer prison sentences for women who owned houses where prostitutes plied their trade than for the prostitutes who lived in such houses. Madams—who it seems irritated respectable middle class citizens most of all—formed the entrepreneurial arm of prostitution without whose encouragement some women might not have entered the profession and also without whom those who had become prostitutes would have a more difficult time conducting their activities.
It is also probable that the financial success of some madams created resentment among other citizens. After all, some few owners of broth-els in Cincinnati and Louisville possessed real estate worth as much as $8,000, and almost all of them owned tangible goods worth at least a few hundred dollars. These women therefore made good money, more than many middle class professionals, while flaunting middle class ideals of women's superior morality. In fact, the Cincinnati "census" of prostitutes taken in 1858 estimated that $250,000 had been invested in property used for prostitution. According to middle class thinking, madams ought to have served as warnings of the tragic consequences of women's public activities, not as examples of financial independence.24

The new code covering prostitution allowed judges to punish prostitutes and madams harshly. Women convicted of keeping a house of ill-fame, for example, could be fined from fifty to three hundred dollars, sent to jail, and fed a diet of bread and water. Indeed, brothel owner Emma Wheeler was fined $100 for the crime, and when she was convicted on the same charge eighteen months later her fine was increased to $200. In another case, the court seized a brothel operated by Biddy Fury and William Swift near the Miami Canal and sold the couple's furniture to pay fines of $100 and court costs. The prostitutes in the brothel, on the other hand, were "discharged after admonition from the Court."25 The new laws governing prostitution, however, did have some loopholes. Early in the 1850s, for example, the Cincinnati courts had to decide whether married women who kept brothels could be prosecuted, indicating perhaps that this was not an uncommon phenomenon. The court ruled that "when married women, living with their husbands, conducted a house for the purpose of prostitution it would be presumed, unless the contrary were proved, that they acted under the coercion of their husbands and consequently were not amenable for the crime."26

Sometimes owners of brothels used legal means to keep themselves out of prison. This was possible because, as the courts attempted to
regulate the sex trade, jurisdiction over the new laws could be confusing. A conflict in jurisdiction in Cincinnati between the police court that prosecuted prostitutes and the Court of Common Pleas that handled brothel owners, set one owner free when the police court mistakenly sentenced her. To add more confusion to the laws, the legal terms or words used in court cases, as opposed to the facts or substance of in a case, could determine the crime and the punishment both. For example, in contrast to the punishment given to the actual owners of brothels, women and men charged only with “harboring lewd women” usually paid a small fine and court costs. In July 1854, Mary Johnston, listed as “colored” by the press, was fined $5 and costs for “harboring lewd women,” both white and “colored.” Since Johnston apparently did not own the house, her fine was small.27

In 1858 in the area of Cincinnati known to locals as “Bucktown” where most of the free blacks in town lived, the arrest of brothel owners provides a clue to the class basis of the enforcement of local laws. In this case, “four persons were yesterday arrested charged with renting buildings in ‘Bucktown’ to be used as houses of ill fame.” The paper did not argue against these charges, but stated that “some of the more genteel establishments within five minutes of the City Buildings” should be investigated as well. The implication, of course, was that houses which served clients who could pay high prices or more prominent members of the community or which were operated by whites would not be prosecuted. Similarly, a white man found at the house Mary Johnston mentioned above was arrested along with Johnston’s black patrons, but he did not appear before the court, even though the press questioned the omission implying that the court had given special treatment to Johnston’s middle class white customers. In short, while progress had been made in devising laws to prosecute owners, the courts and police enforced laws selectively and economic status determined the probability of prosecution. This was not unusual. Historians Patricia Cline Cohen and Gilfoyle have noted selective enforcement in New York City where some middle class property owners rented to madams who operated expensive brothels and consequently made considerable income from those rentals but without being charged or going to jail.28

Prostitutes, however, who merely worked in a house they did not own themselves, were seldom charged with serious crimes and received lower fines for their conduct than did owners or renters of the buildings. Specifically, their behavior was often described as drunkenness or “bad language” rather than prostitution, and they were charged and prosecuted accordingly. When, for example, Cin-
cincinnati police arrested the owner of a confectionery for keeping a disorderly house, they also arrested Melinda Thompson, a “cyprian,” and her customer for using bad language, fining her five dollars plus costs. Women who walked the streets at night were also subject to a five-dollar fine and sometimes a stint in jail. Indeed, the Cincinnati city council labeled as misdemeanors several different offenses such as two or more prostitutes walking together at night, “lewd” and “immoral acts,” indecent “exhibition,” “obscene language,” and “disorderly conduct.” Like the Cincinnati courts, courts in Louisville fined prostitutes for a variety of public behaviors and handed out small fines and short jail sentences. In June 1859, Catherine Mathews was sent to the workhouse after she informed Louisville police as well as the court that her reasons for walking along the streets at one in the morning simply did not concern them. Five other Louisville women received time in the workhouse for their activities in a “shanty” frequented by “youths of a tender age” where a “witness” claimed to have seen “two boys in bed with one girl, and two girls in bed with one boy.” In these cases, city officials did not so much try to eliminate prostitution as to regulate it.29

In the end, prostitutes in the Ohio Valley led a hard life during the nineteenth century. Although some prostitutes like Julia Dean lived comfortably, most prostitutes lived in poverty and suffered from periodic arrest, fines, and imprisonment. A look at the life of Indianapolis prostitute Mary Boden demonstrates the limits within which prostitutes who were not financially prosperous worked and lived. In April 1855, Boden and Sarah Childers, “two cyprians of some little notoriety” according to an Indianapolis newspaper, were “severely fined” twenty dollars plus costs for “vice and immorality.” Since neither could pay her fine, they were jailed. Unfortunately for Mary, she had just been released from jail the previous day “for the same offense.” A man with the two women, Austin Webb, “was fined $10 and costs, which he paid and went on his way rejoicing.”30 Then in January 1856, Boden’s clothing caught fire during what was described as a “drunken frolic.” A man, perhaps Webb or another customer, then moved her from the Poor House—probably the only institution which would house an injured and out of work prostitute—to a “hut” where she was lived “in a state of horrible destitution during the late severe weather.” She died, according to the newspaper, from “exposure and want.” Editors, of course, did not print such stories to arouse sympathy for prostitutes, but rather to warn the public of the horrors of the profession and the need to remove at least these most unfortunate women from society.31

When newspapers in the Ohio Valley reported on prostitution in the middle of the nineteenth century, they gave historians a rare look at the institution, one of the few economic choices outside of marriage for young women of small means in a rough and tumble market society. In Cincinnati and Louis-
ville, the trade had flourished under the influence of the male sporting life in which prostitutes provided an essential service. But as city officials and other influential citizens molded the two cities to fit their middle class views, prostitutes faced new restrictions, laws and regulations that did not seek to elimination the sex trade, but rather to remove it from public view. Prostitutes who transacted their business out of the public eye still violated public morals, but did not openly contradict the middle class ideal of protected, domestic womanhood and thereby expose it as a myth for some women in the Ohio Valley. As historian Christine Stansell discovered in her study of New York City, for women, prostitution was “an economic and a social option, a means of self-support and a way to bargain with men in a situation where a living wage was hard to come by and holding one’s own in heterosexual relations was difficult.” Prostitutes became standards by which other women measured their own adherence to the pious, pure, submissive, and domestic lives they believed they must live. Prostitutes, the most “public” of working women, also reinforced worries about the fate of all women who did not adhere to society’s standards. Women who traded sex for cash put the lie to the pretension that all women had male providers to protect them and thereby exposed the fact that the “triumph of commercial capitalism and the rise of a midwestern bourgeoisie” in the Ohio Valley did not produce a complete success for all persons, least of all for poor women.32

The author would like to thank Pen Bogert, reference specialist at The Filson Historical Society Library for research assistance.
Parts of this article are taken from Anita Ashendel, “She is the Man of the Concern: Entrepreneurial Women in the Ohio Valley, 1790-1860,” Ph.D. dissertation, Purdue University, 1997.

1. Louisville Daily Courier, March 6 and 27, 1860. Julia Dean’s brothel is found in the 1860 Federal Population Census, Jefferson County, Louisville, Kentucky, First Ward, pp. 195-96. McDonald survived as she is listed living in Dean’s brothel in that census which was taken in June 1860. Information about Clarkson is found in the 1860 Federal Population Census, Jefferson County, Louisville, Kentucky, First Ward, p. 114.


8. 1860 Federal Population Census, Jefferson County, Kentucky, First Ward, City of Louisville, pp. 195-196. Caution must be used when using census data but it remains the best information we have concerning the personal lives of prostitutes.


12. Thanks to Pen Bogert of the Filson Historical Society Library for help in tracking down Holmes.


15. Both of these works focus on transient workers as sources of violence and not on the mercantile clerks or other young men who are the source of violence in my Ohio Valley examples. In the case of Julia Dean, census information does not reveal the ages of the men involved. Still, their behavior fits the pattern established at an earlier period in the east and one that can also be seen in Cincinnati.


17. Ibid., April 5, 1865.


described in the Cincinnati Daily Gazette, December 6, 1851. Cincinnati "census" of prostitutes, Cincinnati Daily Gazette, December 13 and 15, 1858. See Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, Ladies, Women, and Wenches: Choice and Constraint in Antebellum Charleston and Boston, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 131-52 for a similar emphasis on madams in South Carolina. Madams who owned property estimated at $1,000 or more are found in 1860 Federal Population Census, Hamilton County, Ohio, City of Cincinnati, Fourteenth Ward, Cincinnati, pp. 12, 211; 1860 Federal Population Census, Marion County, Indiana, City of Indianapolis, First Ward, p. 48; Fourth Ward, Indianapolis, p. 26; 1860 Federal Population Census, Jefferson County, Kentucky, City of Louisville, First Ward, p. 207; Second Ward, Louisville, pp. 321, 399, 400. Examples of the payments that prostitutes paid to their madams can be found in Cohen, Murder of Helen Jewett, 110-11 and Butler, Daughters of Joy, 59-60. Cohen in, Murder of Helen Jewett, 85, suggests that in the United States, by the 1850s the era of the "acceptance" of prostitution had ended. The laws of the 1850s were just the beginning of a crackdown on prostitution in the Ohio Valley.

25. Daily Cincinnati Gazette, March 24, 1852; August 22, 1853; August 24, 1853.


27. For court problems: Cincinnati Daily Gazette, October 12, 1857. For examples of charges against owners see: Daily Cincinnati Gazette, March 1, 1853; May 24, 1853; June 15, 1853; August 15, 1853; August 22, 1853; August 24, 1853; November 1, 1853; July 18, 1856; July 25, 1856; October 5, 1857; October 12, 1857; April 1, 1858; July 7, 1859. For examples of harboring charges: Cincinnati Daily Gazette, March 22, 1854; March 27, 1854; March 29, 1854; May 31, 1854. Mary Johnston is found in Daily Cincinnati Gazette, July 22, 1854.

28. Cincinnati Daily Gazette, April 1, 1858.

29. Examples include: Cincinnati Daily Gazette, December 28, 1853; March 29, 1854; April 8, 1854; April 21, 1854; May 1, 1854; September 4, 1856; Indianapolis Daily Journal, April 19, 1855; Louisville Daily Courier, June 1859; July 30, 1859. For other areas of the country see: Cohen, Murder of Helen Jewett, 74-5; Butler, Daughters of Joy, 55.


31. Ibid., January 29, 1856.

32. Stansell, City of Women, 172. Cayton and Onuf, Midwest and the Nation, xvii.