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Love and War: The Civil War's Impact on Prostitution

Sydney Shead

Prostitution is not new to America; it has not only existed for centuries but has been the focus of both the government and the public. Different periods of American history witnessed varying responses and attitudes towards prostitution and prostitutes. Political climate, religious movements, and social norms influenced how Americans perceived prostitution. Social groups played important roles in presenting prostitution to the public as a social problem or an evil. Geographical location determined the regularity of prostitution; large cities saw more prostitution than rural areas, influencing what residents of these locations thought about prostitution. Social movements such as the Progressive Era and feminism also impacted prostitution by encouraging the public to think critically about prostitution. While all of these factors are important when considering changing attitudes towards prostitution, one event in American history marked a significant shift in both the public perception of prostitution and the role of the government in regulating prostitution: the Civil War. Ultimately, the Civil War dramatically changed the culture of prostitution, increasing both the demand for prostitutes and the need for regulation, and these effects continued after the war ended.

During the early 1800s, the public largely viewed prostitution as an evil in society and saw prostitutes as morally corrupt. People were concerned with the lack of morality involved in prostitution and used moral reasons like religion and modesty to oppose the subject. The public was specifically concerned with the immorality of prostitutes rather than the men who visited prostitutes. In 1843, the American physician Dr. Deslandes stated that a young girl was diagnosed with nymphomania after turning to prostitution out of

lust.¹ He linked prostitution to sexual perversion, suggesting that women become prostitutes because they have sexual desires. Additionally, these desires were expressed as abnormal and corrupt, adding to the perception of prostitutes as immoral. Similarly, a book on sexual diseases written in 1854 blamed a prostitute's venereal disease and resultant death on her prostituting to "satisfy her desires," implying that prostitutes risked getting diseases through prostitution because of their own lustful actions.² This also suggests that people during the early and mid-1800s believed that women chose to prostitute themselves purely out of sexual desire, and that disease was a risk prostitutes willingly accepted in exchange for the satisfaction of their supposed lust.

The public also believed that women who became prostitutes were innately corrupt. A marriage guide written in 1850 explained that menstruation occurs earlier in societies with a "depraved state of morals" such as cities with juvenile prostitution.³ This explanation linking biology to morals suggests that prostitutes are biologically different than other women, implying that prostitutes themselves are inherently immoral. In 1860, a medical and marriage guide also expressed the idea that no virtuous woman would decide to become a prostitute, so every prostitute was predestined to become one.⁴ This view, combined with the idea that prostitutes were corrupt, produced an image that prostitutes were abnormal members of society who engaged in immoral practices.

¹ L. Deslandes, *Manhood, the causes of its premature decline, with directions for its perfect restoration: addressed to those suffering from the destructive effects of excessive indulgence, solitary habits, &c* (Boston, MA: Otis, Broaders, 1843), 76–7.

² R.T. Trall, *Sexual diseases, their causes, prevention and cure on physiological principles: embracing: Home treatment for sexual abuses* (New York, NY: Fowlers & Wells, 1854), 227.

³ Frederick Hollick, *The marriage guide: or, Natural history of generation* (N.d.: T. W. Strong, c 1850), 103.

⁴ Martin Larmont, *Medical adviser and marriage guide, representing all the diseases of the genital organs of the male and female* (New York, NY: The author, 1860), 338.

As a result, prostitutes were criminalized in the early American republic through the antebellum period. Even medical books blamed prostitution as the reason why women swore, lied, cheated, drank, robbed, and murdered.⁵ This explains why the American public criminalized prostitution, because sex work was presented as the root of gruesome crimes such as murder. A guide to marriage published in 1858 accused prostitutes of being the reason why men chose to cheat on their wives during the time. According to the guide, prostitutes “depriv[ed] many virtuous women” of husbands and marriage “by attracting several young men to [themselves],” consequently portraying female sex workers as selfish and intentionally cruel.⁶ This frames the act of prostitution as a crime because it involves the theft of men.

The extent of the criminalization of prostitutes was exemplified by a court case in 1836. A well-known prostitute by the name of Helen Jewett was axed to death by a young man of good social standing. During the trial, despite significant evidence, both the jury and the judge sympathized with the accused young man even though he did not testify himself. The judge cleared him and the jury voted that he was not guilty, a sentence that was favorable with the crowd. This case demonstrates the extent to which the public criminalized prostitutes, because no one on record expressed sympathy for the girl who was murdered, and the public was happy that a man who killed a prostitute walked free. At this time, Americans did not value prostitutes as much as other members of society due to the nature of sex workers’ occupation, seeing them as criminals. Men who engaged with prostitutes were not seen as part of the problem but rather as victims of the seduction of prostitutes.⁷

⁵ Trall, *Sexual Diseases*, 335.

⁶ William Earl, *The illustrated silent friend: being a complete guide to health, marriage and happiness embracing subjects never before scientifically discussed, such as* (New York, NY: Published by the Author, 1858), 42.

⁷ Nancy F. Cott, *History of Women in the United States* (Munich, Germany, New York, NY: K.G. Saur, 2011), 234.

Many groups also saw prostitution as a threat to the innocence of society. A book on entertainment published in 1857 called for people to engage in healthier forms of recreation other than brothels.⁸ These groups believed that prostitution was the root cause of the negative elements of society in general. In 1858, a book denouncing abortion stated that “prostitution is the worst bane that civilized communities is cursed with” because it led to abortions.⁹ During this time period, the public saw prostitution as a gateway to other forms of “unacceptable” behavior, blaming prostitutes for the existence of debauchery in society. Sexual norms at this time dictated that prostitution was outside the range of accepted sexual practices, especially because it was correlated to other sexual deviations. This made prostitution unacceptable in the eyes of those concerned with the morality of society.

Despite mass disapproval of prostitution in the first half of the nineteenth century, no real societal reform occurred, and the government never explicitly involved itself in prostitution. As late as 1843, books published about the state of humanity urged the law to not legally permit prostitution.¹⁰ This demonstrates that in 1843, the government was not involved in the regulation of prostitution. While prostitutes were sometimes jailed for soliciting or general debauchery, prostitution itself did not have specific laws or regulations before the Civil War. Prostitutes were not required to have licenses to work, and prostitution was not limited to certain areas of cities. This lack of regulation suggests that, while people saw prostitution as a problem, they did not think it was a big enough issue to warrant developing solutions or reform plans to combat it.

This lack of regulation changed with the beginning of the Civil War in 1861 as large numbers of soldiers congregated in

⁸ Frederick William Sawyer, *Life made happy: or, Innocent amusements* (Boston, MA: Higgins, Bradley, and Dayton, 1857), 296.

⁹ Henry Clarke Wright, *The unwelcome child; or, the crime of an undesigned and undesired maternity* (Boston, MA: B. Marsh, 1858), 110.

¹⁰ Deslandes, *Manhood, the causes of its premature decline*, 228.

major cities. This influx of men led to an increase in prostitution, as women sought to make money from soldiers from both the Union and Confederate armies. Prostitution became common among troops, and prostitutes were abundant in cities occupied by soldiers. In 1861, Union Lieutenant Josiah M. Favill wrote in his diary that in the city of Alexandria, “almost every house [was filled] with prostitutes,” demonstrating the prevalence of prostitution during the war.¹¹ In July of 1863, the *Star* ran an article about a Union soldier being unable to retrieve a watch he had left at a brothel in Pennsylvania.¹² The point of this article was to expose a house of prostitution for committing theft, not to focus on the fact that a soldier visited a prostitute, highlighting how often soldiers saw prostitutes during the war. An article published in the *Memphis Daily Bulletin* on April 30, 1863 stated that “women of ill fame...consort with civil and military officers in broad daylight,” once again demonstrating that soldiers’ involvement with prostitutes was commonplace.¹³ Personal accounts also support the prevalence of prostitution during the Civil War. Samuel Cormany, a Union soldier, expressed throughout his diary during the war that he longed to be a “better man,” and upon returning home to his wife, he confessed to her that he had sexual relations with prostitutes during the war.¹⁴ Prostitution became a part of the Civil War, and the fact that soldiers engaged with prostitutes was widely accepted.

Soldiers’ infatuation with prostitutes did not go unnoticed by army generals, with some viewing prostitution as a distraction and worrying about the immorality of their soldiers. Union General Joseph Hooker, worried about his mischievous soldiers, attempted

¹¹ Josiah Marshall Favill, *The Diary of a Young Officer: Serving with the Armies of the United States during the War of the Rebellion* (Chicago, IL: R.R. Donnelly & Sons Company, 1909), 65.

¹² Thomas P. Lowry, *The story the soldiers wouldn't tell: sex in the Civil War* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1994), 67.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁴ James C. Mohr and Richard Elliott Winslow, *The Cormany diaries: A Northern family in the Civil War* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982), 581.

to aid police in Pennsylvania in herding prostitutes to one area of the city so that they could not engage with as many soldiers.¹⁵ The fact that a general spent his time and energy working to fight prostitution demonstrates just how serious of a problem prostitution was amongst troops. There were other attempts to remove prostitutes from cities occupied by soldiers. On July 8, 1863, the *Nashville Dispatch* reported that Union General Granger stated that because prostitutes were “demoralizing the army,” their removal from Nashville was a “military necessity” and they were to be sent north on steamboats.¹⁶ Not only does this removal attempt demonstrate that generals wanted prostitution to decrease for the benefit of the army, but it gives an idea of how prostitutes were treated during the beginning of the Civil War. Women were rounded up and forced to relocate, suggesting that prostitutes were not viewed as people with their own rights, but rather as property of the state. This removal attempt failed, however, because the city in which the prostitutes were sent did not want to receive a large number of prostitutes and promptly sent them back to Nashville.¹⁷ Prostitution was proving to be an immovable problem amongst troops; as long as major cities were occupied by soldiers, prostitution in these cities was not going anywhere.

While loose morals and a lack of soldier focus accompanied prostitution, soon something more sinister threatened the troops: venereal disease. Generals began to worry as their soldiers contracted diseases in mass numbers. Specific to the Union army, 78,382 white soldiers contracted and were diagnosed with syphilis during the Civil War and more than 100,000 soldiers became infected with gonorrhea.¹⁸ Sexual disease presented a larger problem than the temporary illness and discomfort of soldiers. Those soldiers who did contract venereal diseases were often unable to perform the physical duties required of them during the

¹⁵ Lowry, *The story the soldiers wouldn't tell*, 64.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

war. In severe cases, venereal disease resulted in death. It is estimated that one-third of soldiers who died in veteran's homes, both Union and Confederate, died of venereal disease.¹⁹ A total of 224,586 Union soldiers and 164,000 Confederate soldiers died of disease during the Civil War, including venereal disease.²⁰

Venereal disease posed a threat to both the health of soldiers and the strength of both armies. During the middle of a domestic war, people feared for the future of the United States government, and the issue of diseased soldiers did nothing to help ease public distress. Without healthy soldiers, both Union and Confederate troops were at risk of being weakened before even fighting any battles.

Fearing the effect on their armies, generals—as well as each army's respective government—focused on the problem of inadequate healthcare more than they had before. In the early years of the war, army hospitals were located in various vacated buildings such as hotels, houses, and warehouses, featuring poor sanitation.²¹ However, by 1863, the United States Army Medical Corps had developed 151 hospitals with 58,716 beds total, with basic sanitation levels. The Union army, having more government support and money to spend on healthcare reform, created specific hospitals for various injuries. In 1864, General Ulysses S. Grant approved of a hospital featuring 10,000 beds with 18 trains running from the hospital to Petersburg. The Confederate army also built new hospitals, but it did not develop a large hospital network that served the army as a whole the way that the Union army did.²² These reforms were revolutionary because they led to the first expansive healthcare system and greatly improved healthcare options for diseased soldiers.

¹⁹ Ibid., 108.

²⁰ James R. Arnold, *Health Under Fire: Medical Care During America's Wars* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2014), 59.

²¹ Ibid., 61.

²² Ibid., 62.

While the improvement of hospitals was important in maintaining the health of soldiers in both armies, no one could ignore the root of the problem of venereal disease: prostitution. While having already tried and failed to remove prostitutes from cities, both Union and Confederate governments turned their attention to the health aspects of prostitution. Morals took a backseat to the life-threatening effects of venereal diseases caused by prostitution, and the eradication of prostitution was no longer the focus of generals' efforts. This suggests that the public accepted prostitutes more during the Civil War than before because it was acknowledged that soldiers were regularly visiting prostitutes. Since generals became less concerned with the morality of their troops in favor of their health, the morality of prostitutes themselves decreased in importance to the public. If prostitutes were to remain in cities interacting with soldiers, the only thing that generals could do was try to make prostitution as safe as possible for soldiers in order to spare them the contraction of venereal diseases. As with the improvement of hospitals and healthcare in general, Union armies had more assistance and a larger budget from their government for reform. One particular city, Nashville, Tennessee, saw the largest quantity of government involvement in the intersection of prostitution and healthcare.

In 1863, Provost Marshal Spalding established a four-part plan to combat venereal disease in Union-occupied Nashville. For the first time, prostitutes were given licenses and their addresses were recorded by government officials, serving as the first registration of prostitutes. Secondly, prostitutes were subject to weekly medical examinations by surgeons. Those that were healthy were given a health certificate while those with diseases were sent to a hospital. The third part of Spalding's plan involved the establishment of a hospital specifically for prostitutes. Prostitutes had to pay 50 cents weekly to maintain this hospital. The creation of a healthcare tax transformed the framework of prostitution by equating it to a business. Since prostitutes were paying taxes, prostitution resembled an equal business transaction

rather than random women “seducing” men like some critics had argued before the Civil War. Lastly, any prostitute found working without a license or health certificate was jailed for 30 days.²³

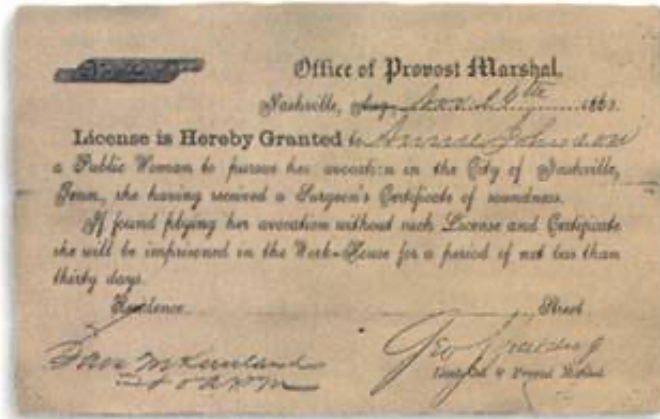
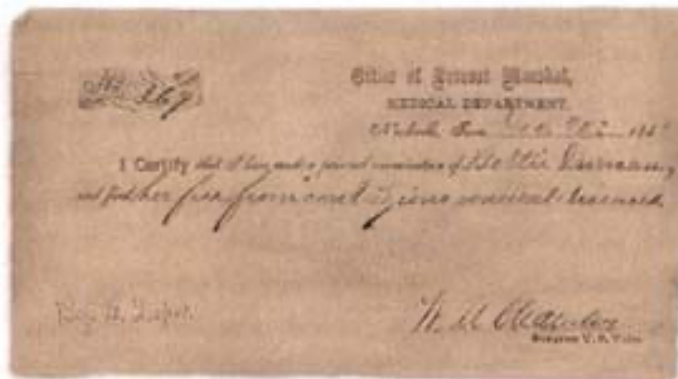


Figure A license in Nashville, Tennessee permitting prostitutes to work. P Lowry, “The Army’s Licensed Prostitutes,” in *Civil War Times Illustrated*, vol. 41 (2002).



A certificate declaring a prostitute cleared of a medical examination in Nashville, Tennessee. Figure 1 T.P Lowry, “The Army’s Licensed Prostitutes,” in *Civil War Times Illustrated*, vol. 41 (2002).

This reform policy demonstrates that the government became more involved in prostitution during the Civil War because there were now standards and legal requirements that prostitutes had to comply with in order to avoid consequences. Additionally, by requiring that prostitutes pass weekly medical examinations, the army improved the treatment of prostitutes medically and socially. Prostitutes now had access to healthcare, and the public, soldiers especially, saw prostitutes as less dirty because they knew that due to these reforms, any licensed prostitute in Nashville did not have any venereal disease. However, while prostitutes received better

²³ James Boyd Jones, Jr., *A Tale of Two Cities: The Hidden Battle Against Venereal Disease in Civil War Nashville and Memphis* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1985), 273.

healthcare than before, the motivation for this treatment was not to protect the women but rather to prevent soldiers from falling ill. Prostitutes still faced a lack of autonomy during the Civil War as a result of the Nashville reform plan. Regardless of any benefits prostitutes gained from the new policy, the women were forced to pay a hospital tax, register their address, and attend medical examinations. They did not have a choice, demonstrating that neither the army nor the government viewed prostitutes as deserving of free will.

Memphis, also occupied by the Union in 1864, attempted to follow Nashville's reform. On September 30, 1864, the city medical inspection department of Memphis gave a proclamation to the women in the city, outlining the reform plan. The proclamation stated that "[a]ll women of the town... must hereafter be registered and take out weekly certificates," subjecting prostitutes in Memphis to the same regulations as prostitutes in Nashville.²⁴ The reforms instituted by both Nashville and Memphis not only addressed the issue of prostitution on a larger scale, but involved the government for the first time as well.

After the Civil War, the problem of prostitution was not forgotten; instead, the issue was once again scrutinized by the public. A book on medicine published in 1867 reported that, in the United States, there were one hundred thousand "harlots" and that over 30,000 people interacted with prostitutes nightly.²⁵ The fact that research was being done on the scope of prostitution suggests that people viewed it as a societal problem in the second half of the nineteenth century. Once the war was over, people began to focus on the morality of prostitution again. However, in contrast to the pre-Civil War era, the public questioned the morals of the men engaging with prostitutes rather than the morality of prostitutes themselves. A postwar medical guide accused men of choosing to

²⁴ Lowry, *The story the soldiers wouldn't tell*, 85.

²⁵ Edward Bliss Foote, *Medical common sense: applied to the causes, prevention and cure of chronic diseases and unhappiness in marriage* (Published by the author, 1867), 86.

“carry home to their faithful wives a disease more loathsome than a suppurating cancer.”²⁶ This book demonstrates a shift from criticizing prostitutes for infecting men to blaming men for contaminating their wives. By using the word “faithful” to describe the wives of men engaging with prostitutes, the guide suggests that the men are corrupt and that the only victims in the situation are the blameless wives.

Following the Civil War, groups began to question why women became prostitutes instead of simply assuming that prostitutes were innately corrupt or immoral. For the first time, the public considered social factors; people began to blame poverty as a motivating factor for women to turn to prostitution. In 1866, a book on the nervous system suggested that for many women who became prostitutes, their only options were prostitution or suicide due to economic needs.²⁷ A common sense guide published in 1867 said that because prostitution was financially rewarding, “it is only surprising that more do not abandon the flickering night-lamp and needle” for prostitution.²⁸ This demonstrates that society recognized that women who needed money had few economic options, and it made sense why some women chose prostitution over the lower paying jobs available to them. It also reveals that working conditions for women at this time were difficult, and many women suffered through jobs just to get by. This explains why prostitution was attractive to some women: they could make more money in a shorter amount of time.

Lastly, society began to develop solutions to the problem of prostitution near the end of the nineteenth century. One of the main suggestions to reduce prostitution was to increase girls’ education so they could have more professions available to them when they

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Jordan and Beck, *Happiness or misery? ... Being four lectures on the functions and disorders of the nervous system and reproductive organs* (New York, NY: Barton & Sons, 1866), 92.

²⁸ Foote, *Medical Common Sense*, 89.

needed money.²⁹ Proponents of this solution argued that if girls were more educated, they would not need to turn to prostitution out of necessity. Many cities also began to require licensing for prostitutes, as seen in Memphis and Nashville during the Civil War. A book on reproduction published in 1877 stated that “the issuing of licenses for brothels has been practiced in several large cities” demonstrating the effect of the Civil War on prostitution.³⁰ The YMCA of New York sought to reform prostitution by promising to promote “purity among young men...the maintenance of the same standard for men and women...to treat all women with respect and endeavor to protect them from wrong and degradation,”³¹ demonstrating that in the second half of the nineteenth century, groups were responding to prostitution with reforms that did not criminalize prostitutes but rather viewed them as victims of impure men and unfortunate circumstance. Reforms aimed at addressing prostitution began during the Civil War but continued into the latter half of the nineteenth century, demonstrating the war’s impact on changing views of prostitution.

Before the Civil War, the public largely believed that prostitutes were innately corrupt and immoral. Prostitutes were blamed for seducing the husbands of moral women and infecting them with venereal disease. They did not have many legal rights and were often criminalized for their work. The Civil War, however, was instrumental in changing the nature of prostitution. Even outside of the elaborate reform plans enacted in Memphis and Nashville, healthcare for soldiers improved overall due to the rise in disease created by prostitution, especially among Union troops. By focusing on how to make prostitution as safe as possible for soldiers, the government indirectly supported prostitution because it became more accessible to men during the war, and the Civil War accelerated the rate at which prostitution became the

²⁹ Ibid., 90.

³⁰ John Harvey Kellogg, *Plain facts for old and young: embracing the natural history and hygiene of reproduction* (Burlington, IA: I. F. Segner, 1886), 225.

³¹ Ibid., 277.

responsibility of the government. This resulted in an increase in social reforms after the war aimed at combatting prostitution, such as programs designed to increase education for girls. There was also a shift after the war as the public began to view prostitutes as victims rather than criminals, and this changed the treatment of prostitutes overall. Those opposed to prostitution began to focus on men as the root of the problem rather than the prostitutes themselves. The Civil War was central in altering public perception of prostitutes from criminals to victims and forcing the government to become more involved in the regulation of prostitution.

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Sydney Shead is a junior majoring in History and Ethnic Studies. She particularly enjoys studying Black women during the Harlem Renaissance. In 2020, Sydney's paper was one of two recipients of the Giacomini Award, which is awarded to the history major or minor with the best-researched paper based on primary sources as determined by the faculty of the History Department.