

## The Influences of the Underworld: Nineteenth-Century Brothel Guides, Calling Cards, and City Directories



The pages of brothel guides contained sensitive information that unveiled the beauties of the underworld. The circulation of these publications—small booklets that cataloged the names of madams as well as addresses and descriptions of their establishments—was shielded from the light of polite society and handled with the utmost discretion, via mail, hidden in secret compartments of peddlers' chests, and under counters or in the back of hotels and book shops, their sales hidden below mainstream business. Once possessed, they continued their life of secrecy, tucked away from prying eyes in the coat pockets of men. Knowing how or where to ask for these booklets gave men who were new to the cities the knowledge that allowed them to fulfill their lustful desires—though for a price.

Throughout the nineteenth century, brothel guides directed men to brothels or sex workers in major cities. Brothel guides were illegal under common law obscenity and nuisance laws, which attempted to expunge lewd publications from public circulation. While some states adopted the English common law on obscene items, others created their own obscenity laws. This legal status led

publishers to adopt different techniques and styles to obscure them from the public. Brothel guides tended to be small, making them easy to conceal. They also mimicked other types of publications to make it easier to hide the guides' true purpose. The guides were explicitly constructed to impersonate bourgeois publications, potentially making middle- and upper-class readers more comfortable. During a time when the middle-class was growing and mobility was more possible, brothel guides adopted this language and imagery to speak to those who aspired to or already inhabited the middle class.

Brothel guides attempted to impersonate city directories, taking on similar characteristics that gave readers contact information and a description of the cities' inhabitants. Printed city directories in America had been around since the eighteenth century and consisted of names, addresses, and professions of occupants of the towns and cities. Brothel guides emulated this type of print listing. They provided the name of the women, their addresses, and sometimes vague hints at their career, forcing the reader to infer that the women were not just offering lodging or food, but also sex. For example, the *Gentlemen's Pocket Directory for 1876-1877* of New York City and Philadelphia lists brothels as "Boarding Houses" with no further information that identify the listings as brothels. Comparing the "boarding houses" in the *Gentlemen's Pocket Directory* to listings in other brothel guides, it is apparent these were not just offering lodging, as you can find the listings in other brothel guides. This particular guide fully adopted the characteristics of city guides. It listed not just brothels, but hotels, mail stations, pool rooms, post offices, and more.

The nineteenth-century public was fascinated by titillating tales of the underworld. People expressed this intrigue by reading about gruesome crimes in the penny press or flash papers, which spotlighted "licentious" behavior like gambling and the activities of sex workers. For example, the January 14, 1843, issue of the *Whip* described a ball held by a well-known sex worker known as a Princess Julia. Widespread interest in such topics meant that they occasionally spilled over into mainstream press and became major news stories. One such occasion was the 1836 murder of sex worker Helen Jewett in New York City and the subsequent trial of Richard Robinson, a clerk accused of her murder. Whether reading the flash press or brothel guides, illicit publications allowed middle-and upper-class men to have a foot in two worlds.



Figure 1: Lithograph of Helen Jewett (1836). Courtesy of the Library of Congress. Ellen Jewett. Popular Graphic Arts, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).



Figure 2: Lithograph of Richard P. Robinson (1836). Alfred E Baker, *Richard P. Robinson, the supposed murderer of Ellen Jewett committed on Sunday morning April 10, 1836 about 3 o'clock at 41 Thomas St. under the assumed name of "Frank Rivers"* (New York: A.E. Baker, 1836). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Massachusetts.

These publications continued to be written throughout the nineteenth century, which fed the hunger of those who were interested in the “underworld.” In addition to the flash press, other forms of 1840s and 1850s print culture that exposed the underbelly of New York included several books by journalist George G. Foster. Foster’s *New York by Gas-Light* included an entire chapter on the subject of sex workers titled “No. IV Prostitution in General – The Fashionable Brothel – A Description that Thousands Will Recognize – Personal Histories of Two Cyprians.” The section is quite detailed, noting how attractive the women

were and some of the women's backgrounds. For example, it describes a sex worker known as Princess Anna who began working after (apparently) consensual sex with her cousin led her to feel guilty and ask for forgiveness from her minister, who then coerced her into having sex with him. She then confessed her actions to her parents, which caused her mother to become ill and die. It also drove her father to drink, which led him to sell his farm, lose his credit, and end up in the county poorhouse. Princess Anna's story, whether true or false, depicted an erotic tale that could have been torn from the pages of the flash press or a brothel guide.

Another contemporary influence on the development and presentation of brothel guides were publications printed by reform organizations. Reform literature stressed the importance of staying away from vices—gambling, drinking, and sex work. They sometimes noted detailed stories of individuals who were reformed or presented horrific stories of those who were not. Some reform publications could be just as racy as brothel guides or other forms of illicit print. For example, in 1831 Rev. John R. McDowall, a reformer who published a weekly newspaper titled the *McDowall Journal* that spotlighted sex workers, was accused of causing arousal in young men. As historian Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz has discussed, McDowall's writing caused the Third Presbytery in New York to not only convict him for misuse of funds but also to question the purity of his motives to reform sex workers.

The 1839 New York City brothel guide *Prostitution Exposed*, housed today at the American Antiquarian Society, adopted a reform literature persona not only to hide its contents, but also as a tongue-in-cheek joke. The guide was dedicated "To the Ladies' Reform Association For the Suppression of Onanism" [masturbation]. The introduction claims, "Vice stalks abroad in the community – the young and the thoughtless are its victims, and how awful are its effects!" The guide switches to mocking language while portraying the writers as truly being concerned for the welfare of those who visit sex workers. The guide also stressed the dangers of visiting the houses and women in the listings, while detailing the attractive nature of the women and their friendliness in addition to their price value. The language of danger shifts from focusing on the danger of prostitution in the introduction to exposing the danger of visiting particular brothels and sex workers in the remainder of the guide. *Prostitution Exposed* adopted the language and fears of reformers who tended to be members of the middle and upper classes, reflecting not only moral language, but class language as well.



the *Gentlemen's Pocket Directory* (1876) and *Visitor's & Citizen's Guide, or Pleasure & Amusement in the City of New York* (1880), only included the madams' name, address, and the class of the brothel. This printing layout spoke to those of the upper classes who used calling and visiting cards as a part of their communication process. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century etiquette books described the correct process, design, and name use in calling cards. Unmarried women, for example, would list their name beginning with "Miss." Brothel listings possess a mixture of both "Mrs." and "Miss," as sex work was not exclusive to single women, but was also an occupation for married women. The guides targeted middle- and upper-class men by mimicking their class's calling card practices.



Figure 4: Pages 4 and 5 of the brothel guide *Visitor's & Citizen's Guide, of Pleasure & Amusement in the City of New York* (1880). Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

Men would open the *Gentlemen's Pocket Directory* (1876) or *Visitor's & Citizen's Guide, or Pleasure & Amusement in the City of New York* (1880) and see pages upon pages of calling cards—women calling and beckoning them to visit. The reader potentially did not just see a guide of brothel listings, but saw female desire in the form of cards waiting to be answered. Feeling desired would have reinforced the reader's masculinity. That went beyond just describing houses of beautiful women for the gentlemen's pleasure. Because the women seemed to be reaching outside of the guide—calling and desiring him—added to a false sense of domesticity as it appeared that the women were reaching out to readers on an individual level. The question was not only whose card to answer first, but also whose card could be answered. Brothel guides designed to appear like calling cards blurred the line between sex workers and middle- and upper-class women.

Poverty-stricken areas of the larger cities continued to pique the interest of the middle- and higher-classes of the late nineteenth century. Books like *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* by Jacob Riis used photographs of the tenements to magnify middle-class society's interest in the poor. Taking tours of slums was also popular among the bourgeoisie, who fetishized and shamed those they witnessed in poverty. This was similar to the

books by George G. Foster that gave detailed accounts of the sex workers and their stories of how they had “fallen” into sex work as well as the stories found in the early brothel guides and flash press. The tours went a step further than the brothel guides that gave readers the knowledge of sex workers they could potentially visit. Now bourgeois men and women were able to enter these spaces with protection and witness how “the other half lived.” The tours brought *New York by Gaslight* to life.



Figure 5: Richard P. Robinson, “The Innocent Boy,” Public Domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Brothel guides borrowed from other forms of print such as calling cards and guidebooks. Arguably, some guidebooks and newspapers were similar to brothel guides potentially due to the same authorship. By mimicking other forms of print that they were accustomed to seeing in their everyday world, such as city guides, brothel guides attracted the middle and upper class or those who aspired to become part those classes. The brothel guides, penny press, flash press, and guidebooks that highlighted the “underworld” of the cities magnified the already piqued interest in titillating tales as seen with the popularity and sensationalism of the murder of sex worker Helen Jewett. Brothel guides connected middle- and upper-class men to a world potentially dangerous to their reputations, but at a safe distance.

### Further Reading:

Patricia Cline Cohen, Timothy J. Gilfoyle, and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *The Flash Press: Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840's New York* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008)

Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

Donna Dennis, *Licentious Gotham: Erotic Publishing and Its Prosecution in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

Eliza Bisbee Duffey, *Our Behaviour; a Manual of Etiquette and Dress of the Best*

*American Society*, (Philadelphia: J. M. Stoddart & Co., 1876)

Natasha Frost, "For Decades, New York's Chinatown Duped 'Slum Tourists' with Faked Danger and Depravity Opium dens, gunfights, and poverty theater," *Atlas Obscura*, accessed March 10, 2021, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/slumming-chinatown-new-york-history-fake-opium-dens>.

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

Katie Hemphill, *Bawdy City: Commercial Sex and Regulation in Baltimore, 1790-1915* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

Katie Hemphill, "Selling Sex and Intimacy in the City: The Changing Business of Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Baltimore," in *Capitalism by Gaslight: Illuminating the Economy of Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Brian P. Luskey and Wendy A. Wolson, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2015).

Katherine Hajar, "Brothels for Gentleman: Nineteenth-Century American Brothel Guides, Gentility, and Moral Reform," *Commonplace: the journal of early American life*, accessed March 10, 2021, <http://commonplace.online/article/brothels-for-gentlemen/>.

Helen Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Knopf, 2002).

Philip Sutton, "Direct Me NYC 1786: A History of City Directories in the United States and New York City," New York Public Library, accessed March 10, 2021, <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2012/06/08/direct-me-1786-history-city-directories-US-NYC>.

Judith Walkowitz, "Urban Spectatorship," in *The Nineteenth-century Visual Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

## Acknowledgments

Thank you to Andrew Ingersoll and Patricia Martinelli for proofreading and feedback, to Dr. Wendy Woloson for the many discussions on this research topic, and to Dr. Joshua Greenberg, Dr. Jordan Taylor, and board members of *Commonplace* for their edits, feedback, and suggestions.

Special acknowledgment to Katherine Hajar for her article "[Brothels for Gentleman: Nineteenth-Century American Brothel Guides, Gentility, and Moral Reform](http://commonplace.online/article/brothels-for-gentlemen/)," *Commonplace: the journal of early American life*.



This article was originally published in March 2022.

---

Brittney Ingersoll is a Historian and the Curator of the Cumberland County Historical Society in Greenwich, NJ. She received her Master's degree in American History with a Certificate in Public History from Rutgers University–Camden. Ingersoll's historical interests are in nineteenth-century gender, sexuality, and material culture, as well as social and cultural history.