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## Prostitution and the Civil War

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# Prostitution and the Civil War

## **Abstract**

It was to my slight disappointment that I found out that the term "hooker," one of many referring to prostitutes (or, as they were called during the Civil War era, "public women"), is not actually a play on the name of Joseph Hooker, the infamous and promiscuous Union general. Fighting Joe may, however, have helped elevate the term to its current popularity; after all, a certain red light district in Washington, D.C. was dubbed "Hooker's Division." [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, prostitutes, sexually transmitted diseases, Victorian society

## **Disciplines**

History | Social History | United States History

## **Comments**

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### Prostitution and the Civil War

*March 28, 2016*

*By Annika Jensen '18*

It was to my slight disappointment that I found out that the term “hooker,” one of many referring to prostitutes (or, as they were called during the Civil War era, “public women), is not actually a play on the name of Joseph Hooker, the infamous and promiscuous Union general. Fighting Joe may, however, have helped elevate the term to its current popularity; after all, a certain red light district in Washington, D.C. was dubbed “Hooker’s Division.”

Pushing past the etymology, however, I discovered a vast array of sources, anecdotes, and documents leading to the world of prostitution in the Civil War era. In an earlier post I explored the prudish nature of domestic sex, a topic not often discussed or even performed. Indeed, prostitution and sex work was held in contempt by the majority of Victorian society: William Quesenbury Claytor on Virginia penned in his diary in 1852 that “impudent prostitutes” were often seen in Alexandria at night, and Union officer Josiah Marshall Favill wrote that in the same city in 1862 houses were “thronged” with sex workers. As discouraged and taboo as the practice was, however, it continued to expand and thrive during the Civil War era.

Sexually transmitted diseases indicate the prevalence of prostitution during the war itself; an estimated 8.2% of Federal soldiers were diagnosed with either syphilis or gonorrhea throughout the war, and far more likely went undiagnosed. These venereal diseases were a tremendous setback for the army, as treatment could put troops out of combat for long periods of time; officers had to ensure discipline and order to keep their men from frequenting brothels. Such problems proved especially prevalent in Union-occupied Southern cities like Nashville and New Orleans.



THE LADIES OF NEW ORLEANS before GENERAL BUTLER'S Proclamation.



After GENERAL BUTLER'S Proclamation.

*General Benjamin Butler enforced harsh discipline on the people of Union-occupied New Orleans; he is noted for threatening to publicly denounce women as prostitutes if they acted out against his soldiers. This editorial cartoon illustrates the resulting change in behavior.*

One effort taken by the Union to eradicate this fraternization was to ship the prostitutes to other states. This was attempted in Nashville, where women were put on trains and sped off to surrounding cities. However, many of them were close enough to find their way back, and more drastic measures were sought. The army decided the solution was to transport the women to different states by boat; they called upon Captain John Newcomb of the steamboat "Idahoe" to transport 100 prostitutes to Kentucky. The captain protested, not willing to tarnish the reputation of his ship, which he claimed would become known as a "floating whorehouse," but he could not stand up to the army, and his trip went underway. Unfortunately for Newcomb, no city in Kentucky, or any other state, would accept his cargo, and he was forced to circle back to Nashville. The result was a ruined ship and a city that had not rid itself of its prostitutes.

The documentation of prostitutes and legalization of their work became an effective—though not necessarily morally sound—solution. This system was implemented in Nashville in August 1863, when public women were required to report to a newly-transformed clinic and be tested and licensed. Thus, prostitution essentially became legal and much safer, as sex workers were required to be tested every two weeks; if they failed the medical exam, they were sent to the hospital until they were deemed "cured," after which they could return to their work. Unlicensed prostitutes caught working were incarcerated.

In the roughly two years that this system was used in Nashville, nearly 400 licenses were issued and the city and Union army alike became considerably healthier. The moral question was naturally raised, to which the army could only conclude that the safety and health of its soldiers transcended ethical values.

So, while the Civil War era is generally regarded as a part of prudish Victorian society, in which intimacy in the home was of a taboo nature, there was no lack of sex.

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