

Wealthy, Free, and Female: Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century New York

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## Wealthy, Free, and Female: Prostitution in Nineteenth- Century New York

### ABSTRACT

Increasing class consciousness permeated the institution of prostitution in 19th-century New York City. In a Five Points brothel that was closed in 1843, the resident working-class prostitutes manipulated accoutrements of gentility to attract a bourgeois clientele. They used the symbols of middle-class respectability to their own advantage, increasing the value of the commodity they offered for sale and enjoying the comforts that money could buy. The artifacts recovered from the brothel's privy suggest that when the women were not working they lived no better than their sisters in the tenements. Ceramics and food remains, in particular, fall into two contrasting groups: one that is comparable to the upper middle class and the other that resembles other working-class residents of Five Points. The duality reveals exploitation as well as economic well-being and pain as well as pleasure. Five Points prostitutes may have looked wealthy, free, and female from the outside, but an inside perspective suggests their lives were considerably more complex.

### Introduction

“As the bourgeoisie has the intellectual, organizational and every other advantage, the superiority of the proletariat must be exclusively in its ability to see society from the center, as a coherent whole” (Lukács 1971:69).

On 10 April 1836, Helen Jewett was murdered in her bed. At the time, she lived at Rosina Townsend's City Hotel, the most popular brothel in New York, and she was counted among the “wealthy, free, and female” (Gilfoyle 1992:97) prostitutes who did everything to please their men and did well for themselves in the process. But apparently these independent women also angered men (Gilfoyle 1987). They appeared to have more freedom than the men themselves who were finding it difficult to marry and support a family on the exploitive wages and new circumstances of the industrial era (Gilfoyle 1992:113). Physical attacks on prostitutes and their possessions were not unusual, and Jewett

was almost certainly murdered by a regular (and favorite) customer, Richard Robinson, a clerk in the garment business (Cohen 1998).

The question raised in this study is whether the prostitutes at Five Points were “wealthy, free, and female.” Was prostitution just a job, no more degrading than any other and considerably better paid? Can archaeology bring anything new to a subject that has received considerable attention in the past as well as in recent years? Dr. William Sanger's statistical work, *The History of Prostitution, Its Extent, Causes, and Effects Throughout the World*, originally published in 1858, was based on detailed interviews with 2,000 New York City prostitutes. His comprehensive questionnaire covered innumerable subjects—age, place of birth, marital status, number of children, number of years in the profession, reasons for choosing it, previous occupations, incidence of venereal disease, etc.—with the ultimate purpose of curing a perceived societal evil. More recent studies (*City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790–1920* by Timothy Gilfoyle; *Their Sisters' Keepers: Prostitution in New York City, 1830–1870* by Marilyn Wood Hill; and *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* by Christine Stansell), published in the last decade or so, use the techniques of social history to place 19th-century prostitution in a social and economic context. The purpose of these studies is not to condemn the institution but to understand commercial sex as part of New York City's 19th-century culture. There is a lot of information available on prostitution in 19th-century New York, but the assemblage from Feature AG on Block 160, a block that was excavated in the path of a new federal courthouse at Foley Square, provides a material record that is lacking in these other studies, a record of the private as well as the public side of brothel life.

Block 160 abutted the infamous intersection from which Five Points got its name (Figure 1). Prostitution was one of the various illicit activities that gave the neighborhood its notoriety, and the brothels at the Points were believed to be of the “worst sort” (Gilfoyle 1992:39–41). Feature AG was a stone-lined privy located at the back

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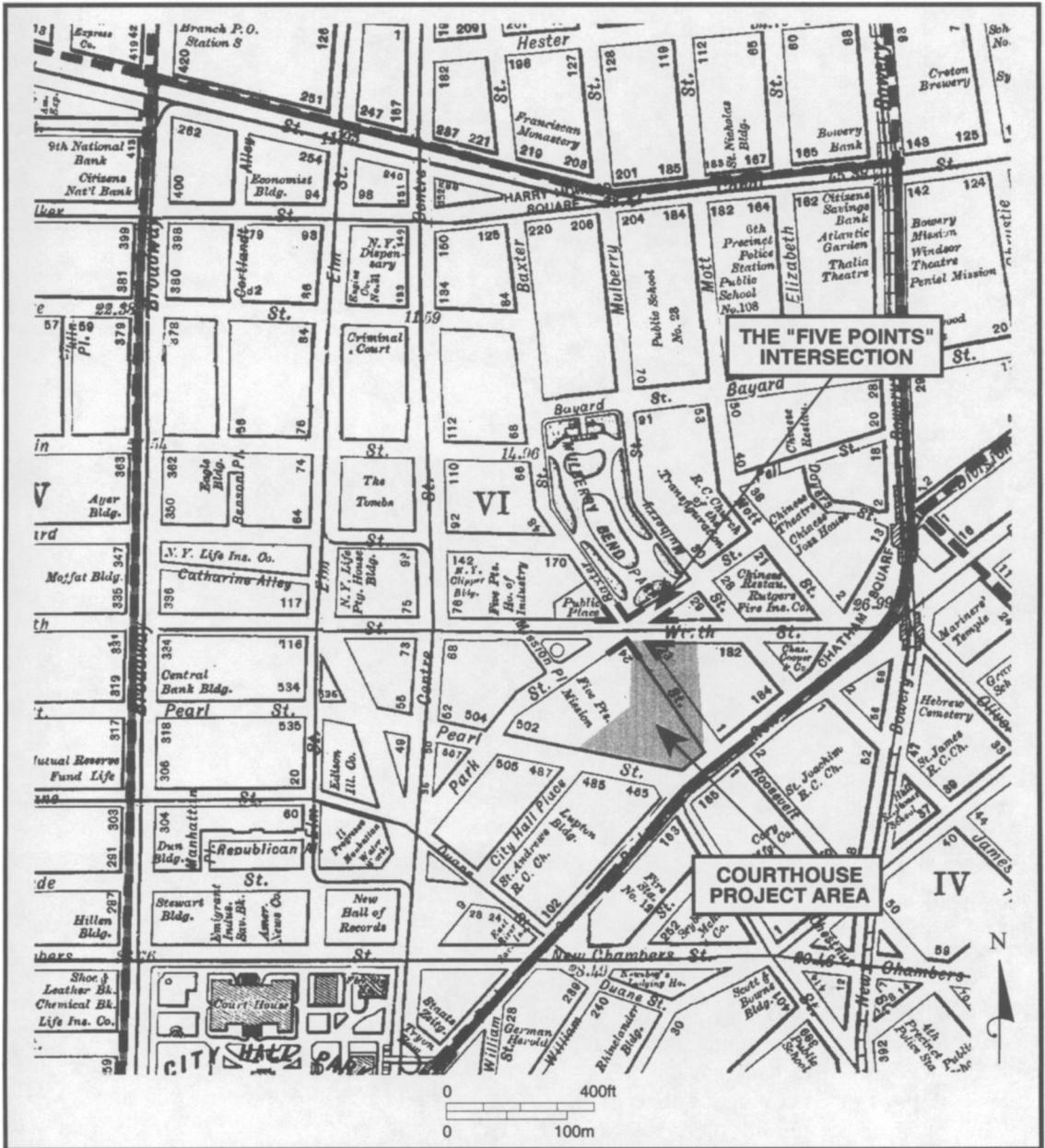


Figure 1. The Five Points intersection and the courthouse site. Base map from Riis 1971:230.

of Lot 43 or No. 12 Orange (later Baxter) Street, one of three streets that created the Five Points intersection. The artifact assemblage recovered, from the bottom of the privy (layer numbers 10 and 11 within AS III on Figure 2) and the portion of that deposit that was displaced when a trench for a wall footing was dug through the deposit in the 1890s (layers 5, 6, 7, and 8), was

different from any other assemblage recovered on the block. The fanciness of the ceramics, including a complete Chinese porcelain tea set (Figure 3), an unusually large number (37) of decorated chamber pots (Figure 4), three glass urinals made especially for women (Figure 5), a ceramic pot with the words “AMAILLE, s.d. Vinaigrier” written on it, and a larger number of wine bottles

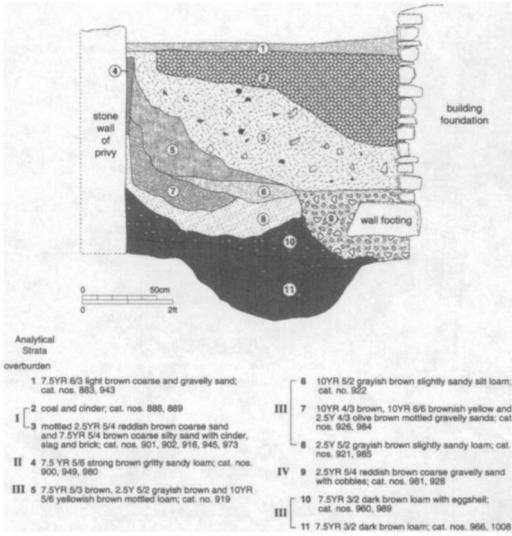


Figure 2. Lot 43, Feature AG, stone-lined privy. Profile of fill layers in western half.

than found in any other Five Points feature suggested that the assemblage related to a brothel. It was subsequently discovered that the skeletal remains of two newborn infants and additional fragmentary remains of a fetus also belonged to the assemblage. The *terminus post quem* for the deposit was 1840.

The Federal Census for 1840 lists seven occupants at No. 12 Orange Street: Joseph Belmer, occupation unknown, his wife and child, and Henry Lichtreker, a coppersmith, whose household included his wife and two children (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1840). Thomas Cogan, a slater, whose household included himself, another man and one woman, was listed at No. 10 Orange Street. Numbers 10 and 12 were on the same lot. A Robert Goodman was taxed on a tavern at No. 10 Orange Street from 1809 to 1845 (New York City Tax Assessments). None of these people reappears at either No. 10 or No. 12 Orange in the 1850 census, but it is interesting to note that the later census lists 19 people living at No. 10 and seven living at No. 12, suggesting that there was room for more than the number that was listed in 1840.

Because the residents listed in 1840 did not suggest an obvious connection to a brothel,



Figure 3. A complete enameled coffee and tea set in Chinese export porcelain (early-19th century). The set includes 9-inch plates (rear left), slop bowl (rear center), tea caddy (rear right), handled coffee cups (front left), and handleless tea cups/bowls (front right).



Figure 4. Decorated chamber pots from Feature AG.

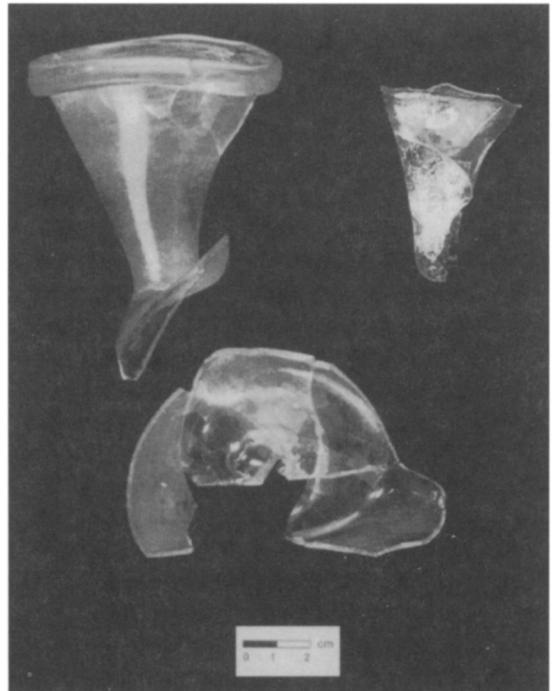


Figure 5. Glass urinals for women.

an effort was made to discover whether any other records existed that might explain the assemblage. A brothel at 12 Orange Street is not mentioned in Gilfoyle's book, *City of Eros*. But when contacted, Gilfoyle found a reference to an indictment (*State ex rel. Blackall et al. v. Donohue* 1843) against John Donohue for operating a brothel in the cellar at 12 Orange Street in his unpublished notes. The complaint was brought by an Irish-born tinsmith named Edward Blackall of 12½ Orange Street and storekeeper Robert J. Gordon of 10 Orange Street before George W. Matsell, then a police justice on the city's police court. It stated that one John "Donoho" or Donahue, who occupied the premises in the basement of 12 Orange Street, was operating a "disorderly house, viz.—a rest for prostitutes and others of ill name and fame, where great numbers of characters are in the nightly practice of reveling until late and improper hours of the night, dancing, drinking, carousing to the great disgrace of the neighborhood." Donahue was indicted on the count of keeping "a certain common, ill-governed and disorderly house" by Leonard N. Whiting, the New York County district attorney, on 14 September 1843. Donahue was arrested and held on \$300 bail. His trial was set for 30 October when he was convicted of the crime. According to Tyler Anbinder's (2001:219) recent historical research on Five Points, penalties for keeping brothels were not generally severe. The majority of those found guilty "received just a slap on the wrist" and many "simply vacated their places of business when indicted which they correctly surmised would lead to a dismissal of the charges." Apparently Donahue was not so lucky.

The proximity of the indictment date, 14 September 1843, and the 1840 *terminus post quem* for the assemblage as well as the nature of the deposit suggested that a major portion of the artifacts related to the closing of the brothel. While objects might have been thrown into the privy by any of the residents at No. 12 while it was in use, the large number of mendable vessels (310) and the number of matching vessels from the bottom of the privy argue for cataclysmic deposition. The deposit resembles the kind of massive single-phase deposit described by Kathleen Wheeler (1996:2) for several households at Strawberry Banke in New Hampshire.

In that case, major deposits characterized by many mendable and matching vessels were correlated with the "resignation" of female heads of household (through death or relocation) and contrasted with gradual accumulations (1996:3). The particular "resignation" at No. 12 Orange Street provides a window into life in a Five Points brothel when it was in full swing.

#### Published Studies about 19th-Century Prostitution in New York

Very little has been written about life inside New York's 19th-century brothels, although the city's prostitutes and prostitution have been studied since the 19th century. In 1858, when Sanger (1939:18) published his work, he believed, as did many others, that prostitution was a "moral pestilence" threatening "every man, woman, and child in the community." Sanger approached his study of prostitution statistically, having confidence that armed with data society might regulate the pestilence even if it were impossible to eradicate it. Sanger (1939:23) also had somewhat enlightened views about what prostitution did to women. He wrote:

There is another phase of public safety which demands the investigation, namely, the preservation of female honor. Those who frequent these haunts of vice are forever employed in casting about snares to entrap the young, the unwary, or the friendless woman. They tempt her to minister to their libidinous desires, and swell the already overcrowded ranks of frailty.

Sanger (1939:23) believed there was hope even for reforming courtesans "for they are human beings, though depraved. Their hearts throb with the same sympathies that move the more favored of their sex ... . Few of them become vile from natural instincts." The moralizing attitude of mid-19th-century reformers is evident in Sanger's writings, but he must also be credited for devising a study that revealed a great deal about the practice of prostitution in mid-19th-century New York. Although the study was initially conceived to investigate syphilis in the prison population at Blackwell's Island under Sanger's care, he thought the disease had to be understood in a broader context. His study looked to the society, its values, and institutions for a framework in which to explain the incidence of venereal disease.

Data for the study came from a schedule of questions administered under Sanger's supervision in 1855 by New York Chief of Police George W. Matsell, Esq., and the captains of police. Two thousand questionnaires were completed, providing information on age, place of birth, marital status, number of children, number of years in the profession and reasons for choosing it, previous occupations, incidence of venereal disease, and a variety of other topics. Particularly pertinent to the study of the brothels at Five Points is his information on various classes of houses of prostitution (Sanger 1939:chapter XXXV). According to Sanger (1939:550), the highest class of house, the parlor house, was "furnished with a lavish display of luxury but not good taste ... large mirrors, gilt, paintings and engravings, vases and statuettes." The prostitutes—three-quarters of them natives of the United States—in such establishments paid from \$10 to \$16 a week to live there, worked from noon to midnight or later, drank champagne with their clients, wore fashionable clothes, and were provided with a "neat and well-arranged breakfast at about 11 or 12 o'clock and dinner at 5 or 6 by an experienced staff of servants usually colored" (Sanger 1939:554).

A second class of house attempted the same standard as the first class but was "not as lavish." The prostitutes included women whose "charms had begun to fade" and the foreign born. The women drank wine and brandy with their visitors instead of champagne and put up with less-experienced servants. The third grade, prevalent in the city's less fashionable districts including Five Points, was, according to Sanger, "equal in all respects to the second class and sometimes superior." The women were young, good looking, and almost all foreign born, the largest proportion being Irish and German. A German variant on this class, prevalent particularly in the First Ward, consisted of a front barroom—possibly the cellar of an ordinary-sized house—where "can be obtained lager beer and German wines" (Sanger 1939:560). A stranger to the city might not recognize this as a reception room, particularly if he did not know that a crimson and white curtain signified the true purpose of the establishment. Between clients, the prostitutes sat in the room knitting or sewing; there were small bedrooms in the back for the

business at hand. Such a place was usually run by a man and his wife: the man to keep the barroom and the woman to do the cooking and general housework, while the "girls" attended to their own rooms. Below these categories were a variety of less savory establishments as well as streetwalkers, who rented individual rooms, and women who entertained in the third tier of theaters.

While Sanger's work was driven by public health concerns, more recent scholarship has focused on prostitution as a gender issue. Hill (1993:2) examines the negative and positive aspects of practicing a "trade" that was "at the fringes of the law and outside the realm of respectability" in a society where women's rights and activities were severely restricted. On the positive side, Hill claims that at least 24 known prostitutes were assessed for \$5,000 or more of real and personal property. Converted to 1988 dollars, these women were each worth a half million dollars or more, suggesting that as a profession, prostitution was "financially the best of the limited occupational alternatives available to 19th-century women" (Hill 1993:100). Negatively, it was illegal, although the definition of this illegality changed over the decades and enforcement was less than stringent. According to Hill (1993:150), houses of prostitution were allowed to operate in local neighborhoods because law officers did not generally perceive them as criminal or a major problem in the community. The women were treated as neighborhood citizens, and when they or their possessions were threatened, they were not afraid to call the watch, press charges, and give court testimony (Hill 1993:159).

While Hill identifies Five Points as New York City's most famous area of prostitution from 1830 to 1850, her study provides particular insights into the parlor houses located elsewhere in the city and visited by the upper classes. Her information comes from previously unpublished letters written by the celebrated Helen Jewett. According to Hill (1993:220), Jewett had a large, draped bed and other furniture, including a work table with "pen, papers, and pamphlets" and a "library of light novels, poetry and periodicals." When she was out of town, she was missed by her regular customers who seemed to long for her company as much as anything else. A letter

from a Mrs. Berry to Jewett in 1835 reads, “Bill Easy appears rather melancholy at your absence ... he is very anxious to see you ... Sam and three of his friends were here last night and enquired for you, but as you were not here they went away.” According to Hill (1993:262), Easy, whose real name was George Marston, was one of Jewett’s regular customers; she made and mended shirts for him and he brought her his friends.

For Gilfoyle (1992:97), Jewett’s career and death “simultaneously represented the dangerous, inevitable results of sexual freedom alongside the tangible benefits of a career in commercial sex.” Violence against prostitutes—their furniture was destroyed, their persons attacked—was, according to Gilfoyle, part of the climate in which men looked for sexual pleasure and companionship outside the home, which had become a bastion of female power. They sought extramarital companionship, but they also resented the sexually independent women who seemed more in control of their lives than many men (Gilfoyle 1992:113). While they risked their health and safety, prostitutes like Jewett lived handsomely—they were, in Gilfoyle’s (1992:97) words, “wealthy, free, and female” —a very different condition from their laboring sisters in the working-class districts of the city. They took advantage of the plight of men in a society that was becoming more competitive as capitalistic labor relations became more entrenched. For the men—called “sporting men” at the time—commercial sex replaced the intimacy and support of marriage. For the women, it provided a level of income that was otherwise unavailable.

In addition to providing a decent living, Stansell (1987) argues that prostitution was a way to make unilateral power relationships into reciprocal ones and a way to escape from, or evade, familial control. Values that called for women to be dependent on men, and for the working class to stay, in its place were defied by women who took on their own support and did not conform to expectations in terms of public behavior (Stansell 1987:175). Often women became prostitutes because they had been deserted or abused, but they also turned to prostitution to escape the control of their families. It took money to become part of the urban youth culture, to buy clothes and go to

the theater. If their earnings were absorbed by their families, there was nothing left for them and no escape into a better life.

These four published studies provide a good picture of prostitution in mid-19th-century New York. Hill, in particular, because she includes Jewett’s letters, approaches an insider’s view. The assemblage of artifacts and food remains that was recovered from the brothel at 12 Orange Street provides a different kind of insider’s view.

### Archaeological Remains

In many ways, the archaeological assemblage from Feature AG (AS III) was unlike all other assemblages from Block 160. Besides the unusual number of chamber pots, the ceramic assemblage included a large number of pitchers (20 out of an assemblage of 300 vessels), substantially more than were found in any other feature on the block. There were also more serving dishes (17 plus five platters) and more small plates (muffins and twifflers). Muffins (34) and twifflers (22) came in a variety of printed landscape patterns, but they were also decorated in the shell-edge and willow patterns, the least expensive ceramics available in the period. A total of 30 dinner plates was recovered, most of them in the shell-edge pattern, the pattern that also included the most serving dishes. Apparently, the brothel’s everyday set of dishes was shell edged.

There were several sets of cup plates, a vessel that is difficult to classify in this case as either a tableware or a tea ware. Cup plates were used as coasters, usually for teacups, but they could very well have been used for wine glasses in a brothel. One set of cup plates is decorated in a dark blue pattern, showing cows against a woodland background, and another with a motif of exotic birds surrounded by flowers. The motifs contrast dramatically with the urban surroundings in which they were used.

Portions of 15 tea sets were identified, most of them decorated in the popular printed patterns of the day (Tyrolean, Japonica, Japan Flowers, Oriental Scenery), but there were also Chinese export porcelain cups and saucers in the Nanking Canton pattern and the complete set of Chinese export porcelain mentioned above (Figure 3). In addition to 10 teacups and four

saucers, this set included a twiffler, a teapot (spout only), a tea caddy, two slop bowls, and ten coffee/chocolate cups. While not unique, it is as elegant as the porcelains recovered on sites associated with upper-class New Yorkers (Brighton 2000a). A unique ceramic type in the assemblage is represented by a set of five matching waisted teacups decorated in a blue printed landscape motif with bands of pink-purple lustre around their rims. Clearly, many tastes are represented in the assemblage.

The glass assemblage from Feature AG even more specifically reflects the activities of a brothel. Of 105 wine/liquor bottles recovered from AS III, 99 (94%) were for wine, five were for beer, and one was for whiskey. Hard liquor was generally not allowed in brothels because of its intoxicating properties. Wine was apparently drunk from tumblers more often than stemware (of 87 drinking vessels, 66 were tumblers, 12 were stemware, and the rest were firing glasses), perhaps because it was not drunk at the table. This practice might have been one of the ways that the rigid rules of middle-class etiquette were broken in the brothel setting. Men not only got to indulge in alcohol and sex, but they were also liberated from the “ritual structure of dining” that prevailed at home (Kasson 1987:138). Other drinking related artifacts were a bottle coaster and two matching punch cups.

An especially large number of wide-mouth flacons (seven out of nine) suggest that they held brandied fruits in alcohol, although flacons were also used for olive oil, capers, or other delicacies. Any or all of their likely contents is consistent with the kinds of snacks that might be served in a brothel. There were also four mustard bottles and an olive oil bottle in the assemblage. Serving pieces included two decanters, three castors or cruets, and a sugar bowl or jam pot.

Five perfume bottles, a nursing shield, a snuff bottle, a miniature flask, and three female urinals (Figure 5) were also found. The nursing shield would have protected a lactating mother’s clothes from being stained with milk. It might also have been used to conceal from her customers that she was nursing a baby. The ideal middle-class wife in this period was a “perfect mother” (Davis 1981:31). The whore represented the opposite, and a confu-

sion of the two was surely not desirable. The urinals would have been used by women who were confined to bed probably with venereal disease. According to Sanger (1939:676), nearly half the prostitutes in New York at the time of his study (1858) admitted to having suffered from syphilis and undoubtedly many more had other similar problems. Only one of the 39 medicinal bottles recovered—embossed “BRISTOL’S//EXTRACT OF/SARSAPARILLA//BUFFALO”—has been identified as specifically used for venereal disease, but other medicines (e.g., Henry’s Calcined Magnesia, Essence of Peppermint) were meant for stomach distress of one sort or another. In fact, all of the identifiable patent medicine bottles in the deposit could have been used to soothe stomach distress (Bonasera 2000:385). According to Leigh Summers’s recent book, *Bound to Please* (2001) the corset, which was an essential component of Victorian dress and would have been used to enhance a prostitute’s sexual appeal, created a good deal of gastrointestinal distress (Summers 2001:111) as well as any number of other debilitating conditions (Summers 2001: Chapter 4).

Conspicuously lacking from the assemblage of personal items associated with the brothel are contraceptive devices, which would have been available in the period and surely would have been used in a brothel where it was in a prostitute’s best interest not to get pregnant. However, six copper cents (five large and one small) were recovered. The large ones had curiously early dates, two dating to 1808 and three to 1793. It has been suggested that women used Vaseline to “glue” a penny over the cervix (Laurie Wilkie 2003, pers. comm.). The copper supposedly made the vagina less conducive to sperm survival. The only other artifacts possibly relating to contraception were the ceramic pot labeled “AMAILLE, s.d. Vinaigrier,” presumably a douche, and a syringe that might have been used for the same purpose.

Six glass lighting components were recovered, including two (a chamber lamp and a float lamp) that could be carried from one room to another. Additional lamp parts, such as finials, were made of metal. There was also a globe to a fire extinguisher (very thin glass that held fire retardant which was released when the globe was broken) and three decorative bird

watering vessels. These types of vessels have previously only been recovered from middle-class sites in New York (Greenwich Mews in Manhattan, Geismar 1989; Atlantic Terminal in Brooklyn, Fitts and Yamin 1996).

A group of sewing materials was found in the brothel deposit that suggests the contents of a sewing box. In addition to the usual hooks, eyes, and straight pins, there was a carved bone stiletto for putting decorative holes or patterning in embroidery; a delicate small thimble, possibly manufactured in Norway; a folding copper-alloy and wood ruler; and a thread winder made out of a bone lice comb that had its teeth removed. There were several tiny, double knob-shaped objects made out of bone that have been identified as the tops of lace bobbins (Rogers 1983: 214). These bobbins, which had a thin spindle and a carved shank (not recovered) around which the thread was wound, were weighted at the bottom with a ring of beads known as the spangle. A total of 17 multicolored beads (blue, black, clear, green) were recovered with the bone bobbin tips in Feature AG. Every type of bead mentioned in Gay Ann Rogers's (1983: 214) description of a spangle is represented in the assemblage:

They [the beads] strung on the spangle follow a certain pattern or variations on it. They may number from seven to nine although more or less is not unusual. The top bead on each side of the spangle is called simply that. The next two beads on each side are called square cut because of their shape. To obtain that shape, the bead is heated and then squared with the help of a file. Square cut beads are often red or white but they may also be dark blue, turquoise, amber, brown or green. The bottom bead, if it is a single bead, is usually much larger than the rest and decorated in some special way.

Other small finds from Feature AG included miscellaneous shoe parts, fan parts, a toothbrush, umbrella parts, combs and a hair brush, many (24) mirror fragments, eye glasses, and a thermometer.

Only 43 of the 118 smoking pipes recovered in the brothel assemblage could be specifically identified. Twenty were the inexpensive fluted type, but none was the short-stemmed cutty style that has been associated with a working-class identity (Cook 1989). The relatively early date of the feature is probably a better explanation for their absence than any pattern

of choice. The assemblage also includes an unusual variety of decorative styles: a bowl decorated with thistle motifs, another with a rose on the left face of the bowl and a thistle on the right face, two with Masonic symbols, several marked "A COGHILL/JACKSON ST" (a Glasgow-based pipe maker who worked from 1826 to 1909), and an unusually large pipe decorated with diagonal lines and a botanical pattern along the mold seams. A total of 21 different pipe styles is represented, only two of which were found in other Five Points features. It is likely that some of these pipes were left behind by the outsiders who were the brothel's clients, but other evidence (discussed below) suggests that many of them belonged to the women who lived there.

Although there was no use-related wear on the 14 mouthpieces identified, many of the bowls (47.5%) showed particularly heavy charring and 27.3% showed moderate charring, indicating that the pipes had been used over some period of time. The heavily charred ones were generally those that were not heavily decorated, and not particularly expensive. These may have belonged to the resident prostitutes. Female smokers may not have worn down mouthpieces in the way that has been noted for their male counterparts, but they very well could have kept pipes in their rooms for recurrent use when they were not working.

### A Middle-Class Signature

The fanciness of the ceramics, the presence of elegant items for entertaining (the punch cups, the wine coaster), and decorative items that could only be considered luxuries (the bird watering vessels), as well as the sheer quantity of material recovered from the brothel privy, suggest that its residents enjoyed a lifestyle that was considerably more comfortable than that of other residents in the neighborhood. Documentary data indicate that the city's brothels generally presented an image of luxury to their clientele. But this sort of luxury was not assumed to have characterized Five Points brothels. The "staff" at No. 12 Orange Street probably came from the working class, but the artifacts from Feature AG indicate that an effort was being made to present another image, one more conducive to attracting a middle-class clientele.

To place the assemblage from Feature AG in a class context, the tablewares and tea wares were compared to a contemporaneous deposit that has been indisputably associated with an upper middle-class household. In her study of women’s roles in the creation of separate masculine and feminine spheres, Diana Wall (1994) used a number of archaeological assemblages recovered in New York City to explore the changes in tea wares and tablewares as they related to the ritualization of family meals. Among them was a privy (Feature 9) excavated on the Sullivan Street site (Salwen and Yamin 1990), which belonged to a Dr. Robson and his family. The Robsons moved

also had a set of Canton-style Chinese export porcelain (Figure 6). The number of broken vessels that got into the trash (two more than shell edge and two fewer than willow) suggests that the porcelain was used on an everyday basis, not only for entertaining. In contrast, the preponderance (42.8%) of shell-edged tablewares in the Feature AG deposit suggests that everyday meals were served on the least expensive dishes one could buy. The brothel also had Chinese export porcelain, including four dinner plates, but these plates do not appear to have belonged to a set. While there were considerably more vessels in the Feature AG deposit, a smaller proportion of them belonged to sets. The many different transfer-printed wares might have been used together, although it is more likely that they were used for snacks served away from the table, especially probable since so many of them were small plates (twifflers or muffins).

The contrast between the upper middle-class and brothel assemblages is less pronounced for tea wares (Figure 7, Tables 3 and 4). The Robsons had several tea sets, possibly used in different contexts, as Wall (1994) has suggested. They owned Chinese export porcelain with overglaze decoration in at least three different patterns, a blue Fitzhugh set, and matching cups and saucers with floral printed and floral painted decoration. In the brothel, there were also matching tea wares in printed floral and landscape patterns, Japanese and Chinese landscapes printed on cups and saucers, and some vessels with luster decoration. But the most unusual and truly elegant tea service in the brothel was made of Chinese

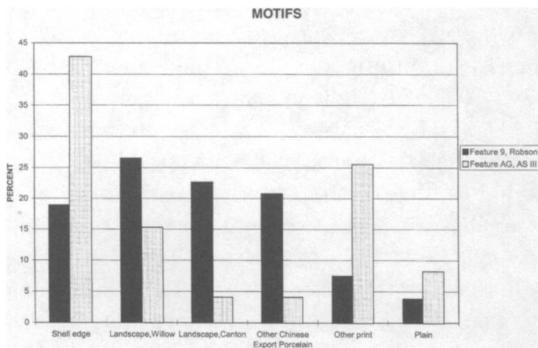


Figure 6. Style of motif on tablewares: Feature 9 (Robson) and Feature AG (brothel).

to Washington Square South in 1841, and the artifacts found in their privy probably represent household refuse that was deposited when they installed plumbing in the house several years later. Figure 6 compares percentages of tablewares classified by their decorative motifs from the Robson deposit with percentages of similarly decorated tablewares from Feature AG. The Feature 9 data were taken from Wall’s (1994: 204) Table E-4c in Appendix E. Tables 1 and 2 show the frequency of types of vessels from each of the sites. The *terminus post quem* and mean ceramic dates (1823 for the Robson deposit and 1824 for Feature AG) are comparable. The deposition date for Robson was 1849–1855; for AG it was 1843.

Although the Robson household apparently continued to use inexpensive tablewares (shell-edged and willow-decorated white wares), they

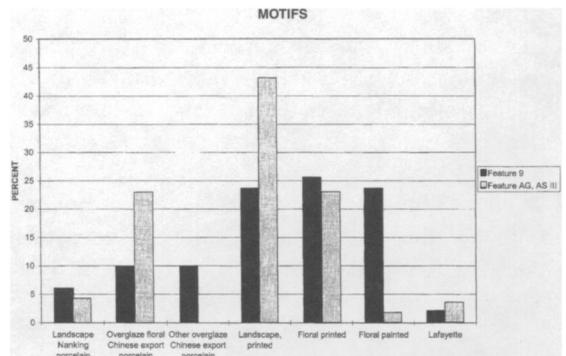


Figure 7. Style of motif on tea wares: Feature 9 (Robson) and Feature AG (brothel).

TABLE 1  
FREQUENCY OF TABLEWARE TYPES FROM FEATURE 9

Vessel Type	Shell edged	Landscape Willow	Landscape CEP/Canton	Other CEP	Other Print	Plain	Total
Plate	3	9	2	2	3	-	19
Soup	-	1	3	-	-	2	6
Twiffler	1	1	2	2	-	-	6
Muffin	4	2	4	7	-	-	17
Platter	2	-	-	-	1	-	3
Boat	-	-	1	-	-	-	1
Tureen	1	1	-	-	-	-	2
Total	11	14	12	11	4	2	54

CEP=Chinese export porcelain

(Data from Wall 1994: Table E-4C)

TABLE 2  
FREQUENCY OF TABLEWARE TYPES FROM FEATURE AG (AS III)

Vessel Type	Shell edge bl./gr.	Landscape Willow	Landscape CEP/Canton	Other CEP	Other Print	Plain	Total
Plate	11	3	4	-	5	2	25
Soup	6	-	-	-	2	1	9
Twiffler	3	4	-	1	7	-	15
Muffin	8	8	-	-	10	2	28
Platter	5	-	-	-	-	-	5
Dish	9	-	-	3	1	2	15
Tureen	-	-	-	-	-	1	1
Total	42	15	4	4	25	8	98

CEP=Chinese export porcelain

TABLE 3  
FREQUENCY OF TEA WARE TYPES FROM FEATURE 9

Vessel Type	Landscape Chinese <sup>1</sup>	Overglaze Floral CEP <sup>2</sup>	Overglaze CEP	Landscape Printed	Floral Printed	Flora Painted	Lafayette	Total
Teacup	2	-	1	3	4	-	-	10
Saucer	1	3	1	3	8	8	1	25
Tea bowl/Ir <sup>3</sup>	-	-	-	4	-	1	-	5
Tea bowl	-	1	2	2	1	3	-	9
Coffee cup	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1
Pot	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Total	3	5	5	12	13	12	1	51

<sup>1</sup> soft paste porcelain

<sup>2</sup> Chinese export porcelain

<sup>3</sup> Irish

(Data from Wall 1994: Table E-4C)

TABLE 4  
FREQUENCY OF TEAWARE TYPES FROM FEATURE AG (AS III)

Vessel Type	Landscape CEP	Overglaze Floral CEP	Overglaze CEP	Landscape Printed	Floral Printed	Flora Painted	Lafayette	Total
Teacup	3	10	-	28	19	-	2	62
Saucer	2	4	-	25	6	2	2	41
Slop Bowl	-	2	-	3	3	-	-	8
Coffee Cup	-	10	-	-	-	-	-	10
Pot	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Tea caddy	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Total	5	28	-	56	28	2	4	123

CEP=Chinese export porcelain

export porcelain decorated in a floral spray pattern done with overglaze enamel painting and gilding. It exceeds the quality of anything owned by the Robsons and certainly anything owned by any other household investigated on Block 160. These elaborate tea wares suggest that, for the purpose of entertaining, the brothel put on an elegant face. Tea, coffee, and alcohol, as well as snacks served on small plates, were probably offered to clients rather than full meals. Although the time and context were different, Nel Kimball's (1970:89) memoir of her days as a prostitute in Saint Louis and New Orleans include a description of the kinds of snacks that were being served in her day: "some little cakes, some good smoked ham, a bit of the best baked bread, [and] iced wine."

The contrast between the brothel's tablewares and tea wares suggests a distinction between the meals that were served to the resident prostitutes in private, when they were not working, and the public ones served in the company of clients. For private meals, they ate from dishes that were identical to those being used by their families in the nearby tenements, while in public they enjoyed the accoutrements of the middle class. A deposit associated with a tenement full of Irish workers on the other side of Block 160, for instance, included sets of shell-edged and willow-decorated tableware and a variety of transfer-printed tea wares (Brighton 2000b).

The food remains from Feature AG also reflect duality. The cheapest cuts of meat—picnic hams, pork foreshank/hocks—and quantities of inexpensive fish made up the largest portion of food remains from Feature AG. These are

the same cuts that were found associated with the Irish tenement (Milne and Crabtree 2000). As elsewhere on Block 160, oysters and hard shell clams were recovered in some quantity, but in this case, the oysters, at least, may have been served as aphrodisiacs and eaten in sexually suggestive ways, again in defiance of middle-class etiquette. The brothel deposit also included exotic foods—veal, soft-shell clams, coffee—that were not found elsewhere. Everyday fare appears to have resembled the common working-class diet; the exotics were not present in contemporary deposits associated with tenements on the block.

#### Comparing Brothel Assemblages

Donna Seifert (1991:93) has argued that differences between the life style of brothel households and working-class households relate to "household composition, function, and income." Using data from a midden in a Washington, DC, neighborhood known as Hooker's Division (for the Civil War general of the same name), Seifert compared functional artifact groups (after South) from the brothel with artifact groups from white and black working-class households. Although her brothel assemblage (a total of eight, with 184 artifacts) dates approximately 50 years later than the Feature AG assemblage, the key categories that Seifert associates with a brothel life style, i.e., the personal, tobacco, and clothing groups, are proportionately comparable to Feature AG (Figure 8). An exception is the activities group, which includes artifacts related to lighting. While Seifert included lamp glass in

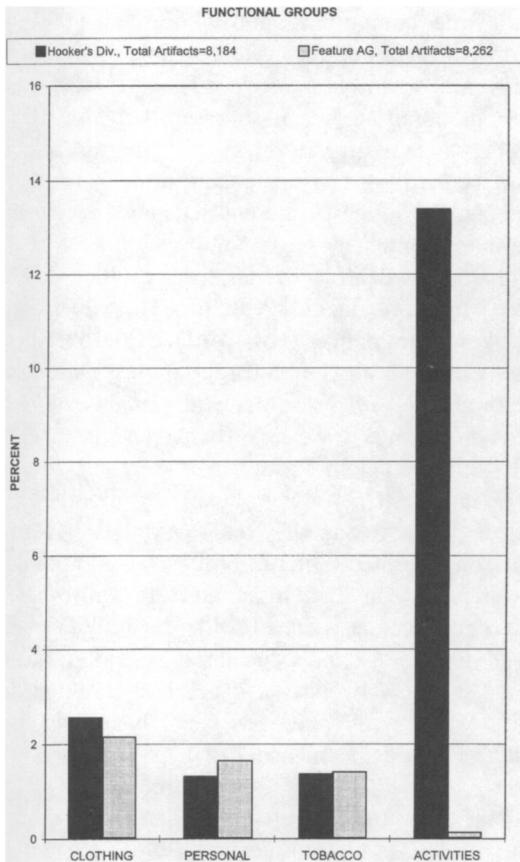


Figure 8. Percentages of functional groups related to prostitution, Hooker's Division and Five Points.

this category, such fragments were classified as miscellaneous glass in the Feature AG analysis. This resulted in a considerably lower proportion of lighting artifacts than in the Hooker's Division assemblage, but the number of lamp parts was relatively higher than from other features on Block 160 and included such unusual pieces as a float lamp, meant to be suspended from a string, and a chamber lamp.

The proportion of smoking pipes for both the Hooker's Division brothel and Feature AG is surprisingly small if the intuitive association of pipes with male clients is assumed. Seifert attributes the low number in her assemblage to the introduction of cigarettes. Feature AG requires another explanation. As noted above, the pipes themselves are a strange mixture of styles. What is constant is their association with sewing materials, and it appears likely

that many of the pipes in the AG assemblage belonged to the brothel residents rather than their clients.

If the contents of the reception room were deposited in the privy before the contents of the individual chambers, the bottommost layers in the deposit (Nos. 10 and 11 on Figure 2) should include more tea ware and tableware than the overlying deposits (Nos. 5–8 on Figure 2), which were created when the upper portion of the privy fill was disturbed by the construction of a wall. Indeed, 58.5% of the tea ware and tableware came from the lowest deposit (No. 11) and another 24.8% came from the overlying layer (No.10). Conversely, 75% of the tobacco pipes came from the upper four layers (5–8) and another 22.9% came from No.10. It is these upper layers that include more things from individual boudoirs, the contents of which might have been thrown into the privy last.

Almost all of the sewing materials were also found in the upper layers, and pipes and sewing materials were always found together (Table 5). Prostitutes at 12 Orange Street apparently passed their time sewing and smoking, a slightly different scenario than was suggested by the accoutrements of Jewett's room at Rosina Townsend's fashionable brothel on the other side of Broadway. The smoking may have been a working-class girl's indulgence in private, although the literature is silent on smoking behavior among 19th-century prostitutes. But while she may have clenched a clay pipe between her teeth like her sisters in the tenements, she didn't have to sew shirts at six cents apiece to make ends meet. Instead, she embroidered, made lace, and mended her own fancy clothes, a kind

TABLE 5  
DISTRIBUTION OF SEWING AND SMOKING ARTIFACTS IN FEATURE AG

Layer	No. of Pipes	No. of Sewing Items
5	23	13
6	18	13
7	12	2
8	36	17
10	27	9
11	2	1
TOTAL	118	55

of genteel sewing more usually associated with the upper classes. In this instance, the prostitutes at 12 Orange Street appear to have created their own duality, combining their working-class selves with their invented identities as appropriate companions for middle-class men.

## Conclusions

Prostitution is inseparable from Five Points' reputation as a sink of iniquity, but even its most ardent critics have appreciated a prostitute's "style." George Foster (1990:95) found some prostitutes "quite beautifully arrayed and in the latest Parisian style." Prostitutes not only knew how to make themselves attractive, they knew how to put on class, to manipulate their image to appeal to the men of means they wanted to attract. The residents of 12 Orange Street turned to commercial sex to make a living. It provided them with independence from their families and the opportunity to indulge in comforts that were unavailable in the tenements: fancy food, fancy clothes, better living conditions. They got to "act" middle class in public, although the archaeological data suggest that luxuries were limited to times when they were working. They lived dual lives, coming from one thing and portraying another.

The assemblage recovered from an Orange Street brothel that was closed in 1843 reflects the dual identities of the prostitutes who lived and worked there. The cheapest dishes were used for everyday meals, while the most expensive were available for entertaining. The cheapest cuts of meat made up the largest proportion of food remains, but there were also expensive cuts not seen elsewhere in deposits associated with working-class inhabitants of Block 160. Heavily charred pipes, found consistently with sewing materials, suggest that the women may have spent daytime hours smoking and sewing—doing what their mothers and sisters were doing in the tenements—while at night they looked like the wives of their middle-class customers. They suffered stomach distress and venereal disease in private; for their public—very possibly politicians from nearby City Hall—they served tea and wine in chambers bedecked with bird cages and fancy dishes decorated with scenes of war and patriotism that would appeal to male fantasies (unscratched plates decorated with

LaFayette contemplating the tomb of Franklin and with Commodore McDonough's Victory were among those recovered). At least one woman clung to her Irish identity by displaying a saucer with the image of Hibernia ringed with acorns. A German inscription on a medicine bottle suggests there also may have been German women at 12 Orange Street.

Prostitutes dealt with the risks of the profession while enjoying its benefits. They attempted to avoid pregnancy (Hill 1993:235), but they also endured unwanted pregnancies and bore children. Whether the skeletal remains of two newborn infants (probably twins) and fragments of a third found in Feature AG were the results of infanticide (Crist, this volume) or stillbirth, they reflect personal tragedy. There is also evidence that some residents of the brothel were nurturing children and, in fact, imbuing them with values that have been associated with the middle class (Wall 1994). A child's cup inscribed with a name or other legend would have been an incentive to learn to read; a toy tea set would have helped a little girl learn the manners of a proper lady.

The brothel at 12 Orange Street, like many others, was tucked between respectable stores and the homes of families with children, but it was also just a few doors from the intersection that was the center of Five Points' infamy and around the corner from a street that was lined with brothels. District attorney indictments (District Attorney, New York City 1820–1843) and police court papers (Police Court, New York City 1820–1842) identified at least six addresses at which brothels were closed down on the Cross Street side of Block 160. Even so the brothel at No. 12 Orange did not conform to the image of an impoverished dive assumed to characterize the sex industry at Five Points. The women enjoyed material comforts not available in the tenements at least for the short time they remained employable. According to Gilfoyle (1992:62) the average age of prostitutes between 1840 and 1870 was 23. One wonders what happened to the women of 12 Orange Street after they were evicted in 1843. One wonders what happened to women who went to prison to get treated for syphilis, the only way to get treatment in New York. And one wonders what happened to their children.

Being "wealthy, free and female" (Gilfoyle 1992:97) came at a price. The archaeological

assemblage from Feature AG reveals a contrast between what was public and what was private in the experiences of the women at 12 Orange Street. It reveals positive and negative aspects of a profession that was the most lucrative and sometimes the only one open to working-class women who needed to support themselves. Their independence may have looked enviable to the men who were feeling squeezed by an increasingly competitive and exploitive economic system, but from the perspective of 12 Orange Street, the women were being squeezed by the same system. The artifacts reveal the conflicts in these workingwomen's lives—conflicts between exploitation and material well-being, between private degradation and public performance.

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