

HISTORY OF THE UNHOLY CITY

*Tales of the
Blue Book, the
Big Brick, the
Bloody Bucket
and numerous
other brothels
and bordellos.*

THE FIRST OFFICIAL mention of prostitution in South Carolina is recorded in the 1693 Journal of the Commons House of Assembly. It simply orders three women "who frequented a tap room on The Bay (East Bay Street) and infected a goodly number of the militia with the pox" deported from the state.

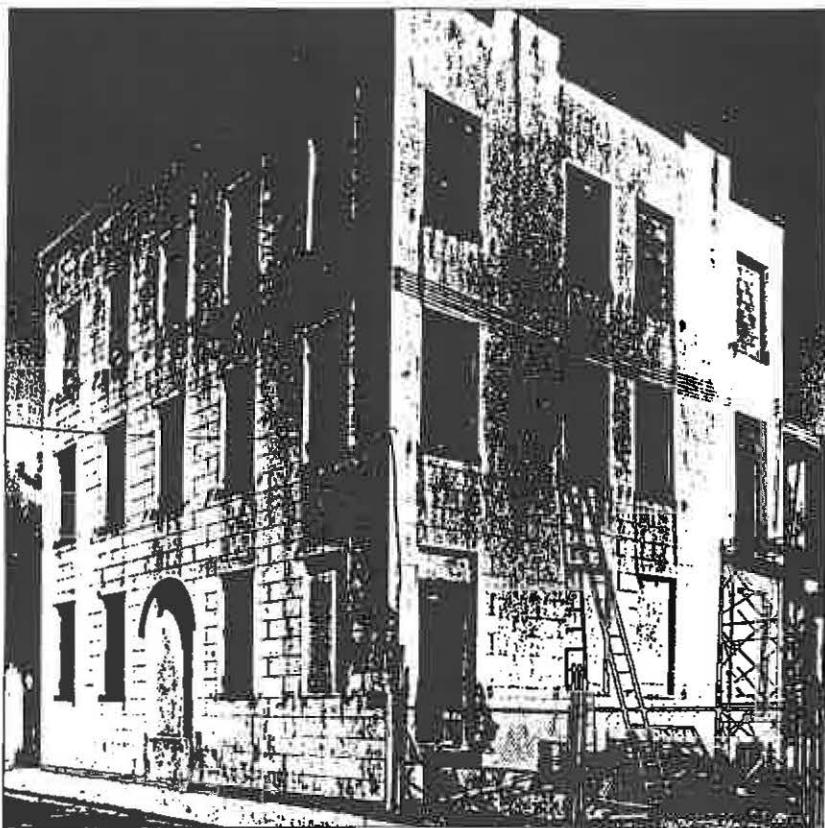
That incident—or at least where the prostitutes were sent—reveals a certain perverse sense of humor on the part of the South Carolinians:

A year prior, William Penn, founder of Pennsylvania, had written to the Lords Proprietors, owners of the Colony, complaining that Charleston had become a hotbed of piracy and that the "chief pirate" was George Raynor. (Actually, Raynor was a member of the colonial council and in charge of harbor fortification.)

The assembly ignored the letter, but a year later placed the three to-be-deported prostitutes on a boat bound for Philadelphia...So much for Quaker Puritanism.

By 1700, a rapidly growing export-import district of piers and huge warehouses sprouted along the waterfront. Taverns and bordellos—developing quickly along Elliott, Union (State) streets, Mulatto Alley (Chalmers Street) and the harbor end of Dock (Queen) and Cumberland streets—catered to the barefoot, horny-handed deep sea sailors, the deerskin-clad fur traders, the militia and the local population.

Taverns became the meeting places of Charleston's businessmen and, in later days, some were stages in the "Shanghai" trade, whereby unwitting guests at



The former "Big Brick" at 11 Fulton St.

the bars were drugged and later woke to find themselves on a sailing ship at sea, completely at the mercy of the skipper. One of the last taverns to take part in this nefarious business was the Bloody Bucket at State and Cumberland streets. This bar became a black dive early in the 20th century and was one of the places known to have been visited by Sammy "Goat Man" Smalls, the "Porgy" of the Heyward-Gershwin folk opera, *Porgy and Bess*.

The bordellos became so much a public nuisance that Thomas Elfe, the noted cabinetmaker whose workshop still stands on Queen Street, wrote a letter to the city leaders complaining that the ladies of the night were debauching the youthful apprentices of city artisans and spreading disease. He was joined by other city residents, and the women were ordered to move from the waterfront district.

They did so just before the revolutionary war broke out, moving a few blocks away, just outside the

old walled city. They relocated in what was known as Dutch Town, an area settled by refugees from the religious wars in Germany. Whorehouses went into business on West, Clifford, Archdale, Market, Beaufain, upper Logan (Mazyck) and Beresford (Fulton) streets and remained in those areas until the U.S. Navy ordered the city to close them at the start of American involvement in World War II.

The name Fulton was applied to Beresford at the request of Walter Rencken, a city alderman from Ward Four, who owned the infamous Big Brick at 11 Beresford.

Unlike the other bordellos that usually had been private residences, the Big Brick was built to be a bordello (in 1820) by a French woman who fled to Charleston following the slave rebellions in Haiti in the early 1800s.

In 1876 it played a role in the recapture of the state government by white Southerners when Wade Hampton was elected governor, ousting the carpetbagger government, composed of northerners and former slaves.

Hampton's man in Charleston was James Conner, a one-legged former Confederate Army general. The city was under martial law with Union troops on duty. Conner and his allies, trying to hold meetings were constantly harassed by the troops and spied on by servants. The Hampton campaign appeared stymied until one of Conner's aides informed him that the madam of the Big Brick had agreed to let them meet there. Hampton's workers met and made plans, actually protected by troops of the very government they hoped to overthrow. The scheme worked, and South Carolina reverted to white control.

When the madam died in 1883, she was remembered by the old timers who held their meeting at the Big Brick. Those who felt they could, attended her funeral. Others sent their empty carriages to take people from the church to the cemetery. Reportedly, it was the longest funeral procession since that of John C. Calhoun, the vice president, statesman and Great Nullifier who died in 1850.

The Big Brick has since served as a storage building for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, a furniture repair shop and a night spot.

The red light district had a long record of being unpopular with Charleston's "nice" people. But the tables, for once, were turned when in 1930 the College of Charleston (all male at the time) received a letter from a madam requesting the faculty tell its students to stay away. The young men came early, stayed late, didn't have any money and got in the way of the paying customers.

In spite of citizens' complaints, the U.S. Navy's Great White Fleet, on its world tour

early in this century, anchored in Charleston and gave the bordellos booming business. One of the most popular was on West Street, a single house that fronted on the street with upper and lower piazzas.

When a merchant ship joined the others in port, one of its crew, a veteran customer at the bordello, hurried there only to find a long line ahead of him.

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At the turn of the century, when the South Carolina and West Indian Exposition was held in Charleston, the madams united to publish "The Blue Book," an 11-page, mimeographed pamphlet listing some bordellos, the addresses, the madams' names and those of their girls, poems, anecdotes and other little ditties. A single copy is on file at the Charleston Museum. On its pale-with-age light blue cover reads the following:

THE
BLUE BOOK
Exposition Number
Charleston, S.C.
1902 / Price 25 Cents

During the 1930s, there was a group of Charleston businessmen including the owner of a West Street house of prostitution, who were known to (please continue on page 55)

Her 1947 concert with pianist James P. Johnson at the Ziegfeld Theatre caused a sensation; so did her 1948 appearance with Kid Ory at Carnegie Hall. In 1948, when the French appetite for quality American jazz was stronger than ever, Chippie was invited to play the prestigious Semaine du Jazz festival in Paris, accompanied by pianist Claude Bolling.

Back Stateside, she took up another residency at the legendary Blue Note in Chicago, playing this time with the Art Hodes Quintet. The press sat up startled at the triumphant return of one of their famous citizens, the former baker's helper.

Then it was back to New York to arrange for a recording session and more club work. Chippie no doubt was anxious to perform again in Harlem. Accordingly, her agent booked her back into the Stuyvesant Casino and into Jimmy Ryan's. The year was 1950.

Chippie must have felt on top of the world. Again.

(Bertha "Chippie" Hill is buried in Lincoln Cemetery in Chicago, Illinois; a long ways away from her hometown of Charleston, South Carolina.)

*Chippie Hill Night:
To hear Charleston's own Queen of the Blues,
tune into Gary Erwin's radio show,
"Blues in the Night," Saturday,
June 1, 10-11 p.m., on WSCI 89.3 FM.*

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(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 21) party frequently. One of the group developed a steamy liaison with a girl who worked in his friend's bordello. When she complained to the madam that the wallpaper in her room was peeling she was told that the owner was responsible for repairs. The owner, familiar with the home of the girl's frequent customer, had the room wallpapered with the identical wallpaper that the man's wife had in their bedroom. His friend never visited the house again.

Another of the group was an undertaker, whose wife suspected him of frequenting a particular bordello. One night while he was there, a friend came in to tell him that his wife was parked in an automobile across the street with a private detective and a photographer.

The undertaker wasn't too drunk to think. He telephoned another undertaker and before long, a hearse belonging to the second mortician drove up (please continue on page 57)

to the bordello. Two men went in with a stretcher and came out carrying a figure under a covering sheet.

One of the last madams in the city was Hattie Breen, widow of Tennessee Breen who, earlier, had operated what was ostensibly a meat market on Alexander Street but was really a front for his illicit "moonshine" whiskey business.

Customers who obtained "corn likker" from the Breeens knew Hattie as a big, healthy looking mountain girl with a beautiful smile and beautiful teeth. When Breen died, Hattie used his insurance money to buy in as madam of a bordello. Although she never wanted to be a prostitute, she thought being a madam would be fun. It must have been lucrative as well. Whenever she had enough money she would go to the dentist and have a diamond set in one of her teeth. When Hattie smiled it was like looking into Tiffany's window.

There was a time in the 1930s when the city was nearly bankrupt and was paying its workers with paper script. Burnet Rhett Maybank became mayor. He attracted national news attention when he put the city back in the black by a rather simple maneuver. He notified the bordello madams, the operators of illegal gambling places and the pourers of illegal whiskey that they would be raided weekly and would be allowed to post the bond prescribed by law. Maybank kept his word that the money would go directly into the city treasury and that there would be no payoffs. It took two years to take the city out of "the red."

Operating at the same time as the bordellos were houses of assignation. These were ostensibly residences, but one could reserve a bedroom for a specific period of time and meet one's paramour there. No questions asked. The last one to operate in downtown Charleston was at 9 Fulton Street and was owned by the widow of a Charleston policeman.

When World War II rolled by in the late '30s and early '40s, the U.S. Navy ordered the City of Charleston to close down all the bordellos or the city would be placed off limits.

Today none exist in the grand manner of the past, when the houses had salons, music, served food and drink, and catered to every desire. The advent of the motel has killed the assignation houses, and there remains nothing to indicate where as many as 29 bordellos once thrived. ■■■



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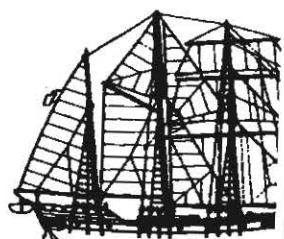
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