The Fight against the Vice District

As the brothels of Hartford’s East Side stood dark and empty in the winter of 1912, a few stubborn voices insisted that the red-light district had kept the city morally decent. In a letter to the Hartford Times, an observer named A. N. Brooks argued for reopening the area in which prostitution had been officially tolerated until the recent crackdown: “Segregation is the only way to control the social evil. Prostitution is now, has always been, always will be with us... I believe the house of ill fame in a city the size of Hartford is a great protection to hundreds of innocent young girls... Rather than have these vile practices spread around in all parts of the city, I say confine their operations to a certain community. By so doing you will improve the morals of our city.”

Rarely before had anyone in Hartford felt obliged to make so public a defense of the vice district, but never before had the district’s existence been in such peril. Embarrassed by a sensational trial that had exposed the police department’s connivance in the vice trade, the mayor had ordered all the brothels closed on December 29, 1911. Though many people expected the brothels would be allowed to reopen once the furor subsided, an innovative new group of reformers was demanding that the closing be absolute and final. This antiprostitution campaign, led by woman suffragists, differed from earlier, weaker reform efforts by directly attacking the beliefs about the use of public space that allowed prostitution to flourish.

Official toleration of a vice district, the suffragists understood, was an attempt to resolve contradictions posed by the nineteenth-century ideology of separate spheres for middle-class women and men. Women, thought to be more virtuous, belonged in the home. When they ventured into the tumultuous streets of the central city, they were treading on dangerous public territory that was more properly the place of men; no respectable lady should loiter in such a public place. Prostitutes seemed to violate these mores, but as long as they were confined to a red-light district, their transgressions actually affirmed the dominant ideology. The promiscuity of “public women” highlighted the chastity of ladies who stayed in the home; their availability channeled male sexuality away from respectable females; and their presence in the unruly slum contrasted with the quiet decorum of the residential neighborhood.

Three earlier antiprostitution reform efforts in Hartford had not challenge the ideology of separate spheres, thereby failing also to attack the ideas that underlay the existence of the vice district. Women reformers in the late nineteenth century tried to bring prostitutes into “homes,” where they could be reintroduced to morality. Another group of civic-minded women sought to purify a disreputable street—without ever attacking the idea of tolerated prostitution. The boldest of the earlier reform efforts took place five years before the suffragists’ campaign, when Protestant clergymen united to turn the coercive power of government against sin, although they disagreed whether strict enforcement of vice district boundaries would suffice. All these reformers believed that urban space was necessarily divided into areas of virtue and depravity. They all accepted the division between the pure female environment of the home and the rough world of the male-dominated street, and many defended the coarser-grained image of a city with differing moral regions. The reformers’ goals were modest—to rescue repentant individuals and to enforce the borders of the vice district. They sought, above all, to shield as many women as possible from experiencing or even witnessing the operations of the vice trade. The suffragists, in contrast, sought to suppress
prostitution even within the red-light district, as part of a larger battle for women’s right to the public sphere—both to public space and to public discourse. Their rejection of separate-spheres ideology made possible new tactics that contributed to their ultimate success in keeping the red-light district closed. Despite the suffragists’ triumph, however, prostitution remained common in Hartford and spread to other neighborhoods. Their mixed success showed the limits of any attempt to purify the urban environment.

Orderly Houses

“In thirty years of service on the police force,” boasted Hartford Police Chief William F. Gunn in 1907, “I have never seen the city freer of gambling and vice than it is today.” One experienced local “sporting man” backed up the chief, sadly agreeing that Hartford was cleaner than at any time in his memory. These two men may have exaggerated, but strong evidence indicates that prostitution in Hartford was no more prevalent at the time it was attacked by pastors and suffragists than it had been in the previous two decades. The suffragists’ campaign was not a response to any increase in prostitution itself. Rather, it reflected a growing desire to spread the values of genteel femininity throughout the city.

Brothels were reportedly “very numerous” in Hartford in the 1880s, but no careful study of prostitution appears to have been conducted until 1892. In that year, the Charity Organization Society superintendent, George B. Thayer, compiled and privately circulated a report on some aspects of the problem. Thayer counted about twelve “regular houses of prostitution,” all but two on the East Side, the riverfront neighborhood of poor immigrants and squalid tenements just east of Main Street. One of the largest and best known was the River House, a four-story brick building with wooden balconies overlooking the Connecticut River. According to a later report, the prostitutes lived and worked on the upper floors of the River House, while boats were stored on the ground floor. Hartford’s brothels, unlike those in some other cities, made an attempt at discretion. “These houses, as a rule, are kept in a very quiet, orderly manner,” Thayer wrote. “The police are very rarely called there, they have no occasion to go. Everything is kept quiet without them. It is only the noisy [sic] ones that they raid.”

Part of the East Side, 1909. Some slums had been cleared to make room for Connecticut Boulevard and the approaches to the Connecticut River bridge, but the neighborhood was still the most densely populated in Hartford. Despite police raids that had closed most of the State Street brothels, prostitution continued to flourish in the side streets. (Atlas of the City of Hartford)

Thayer further reported that dozens of individual women at addresses throughout the city occasionally turned tricks in their lodging houses to supplement the low wages they earned at legitimate jobs. Many of these women lived in rooming houses downtown, on such streets as Main, Chapel, and Asylum, or in scattered residential neighborhoods. Working discreetly in their own quarters, they “rarely if ever come under police surveillance.” Full-time individual prostitutes, concentrated in certain
found that a vigorous policy of raiding these places only scatters them over the city in the better residence districts. It is, and has for years been, the policy of the police department to keep this class of houses concentrated in a narrow district, and if any nuisance or disturbance is created we get after them, but as a rule unless there is some open breach of the peace or disturbance, they have not been molested."9

The Hartford Police Court took an indulgent view of vice offenses, often releasing suspects with small fines or no penalties at all. Typically "the fines were paid, and the houses re-opened on the day the cases were disposed of in the police court," according to one report. Fines against self-employed prostitutes were similarly ineffective, according to a later article: "This simply meant that the women were turned out on the streets to earn the money to pay their fines."10

The Ladies Meet the Girls

Hartford women's first attempt at antiprostitution reform took the form of rescuing individual prostitutes from sin, and it continued long after the closing of the red-light district. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries this work, which previously had been left to Protestant pastors, was taken up by female-run institutions. Three shelters for prostitutes opened, two run by Protestant reformers and one by Catholic nuns. Leaders of all three saw prostitution as a symptom of women's personal immorality and tried to solve the problem through personal influence. Shelter workers, especially the Protestants, hoped to facilitate prostitutes' conversions by placing them in settings that simulated domesticity and family relations, thus returning them to women's proper sphere.11

Similar shelters had opened in Boston and New York in the 1830s,12 but the first one in Hartford was opened in 1878 by the Woman's Aid Society, which had formed as a result of a local Protestant religious revival that year. The society saw its shelter north of downtown as a place where wayward "girls" could be given a second chance at a Christian upbringing under the maternal authority of respectable middle-class "ladies."11 The volunteer ladies held Bible readings and Sunday morning devotional services at the "home." At the services, the ladies claimed, "The girls listen with interest to the counsel of their friends, knowing..."
well that they have their best good at heart." The next step in the process of rescue was to instruct the girls in housework and sewing. Finally, the girls were sent to rural homes where other Christian parental figures would "carry on and supplement with the blessing of God, the reformation which we have only commenced." 14

The ladies formed a visiting committee to make recruiting forays into the jail, almshouse, hospital, and even the dens of iniquity. The society also attempted to extend the mother-daughter relation to girls in the city jail. It joined the Hartford Equal Rights Club in petitioning the city to hire a police matron whose duties would include caring for jailed prostitutes and offering them advice and protection. The Woman's Aid Society opened a room on the East Side one afternoon a week where girls could go to hear music and to be shown the path of repentance. 15

Much to the ladies' chagrin, most of the girls resisted this personal influence. Woman's Aid Society reports from the 1880s complained repeatedly that prostitutes were unappreciative of all that was done for them. Not only did most fallen women shun the house on Pavilion Street, but even those who came often returned later to their wicked ways. The ladies blamed the power of rum and the weakness of the girls. "Many of them are like children, with no self-control," one report lamented. 16 The Woman's Aid Society continued to shelter two or three dozen women a year throughout the 1880s and 1890s, but it evolved into a home for expectant single mothers rather than a reformatory for prostitutes. The society had always taken in some pregnant women, and it shifted more in this direction after 1891, when the Shelter for Women opened on the East Side.17

Like the Woman's Aid Society, the Shelter for Women was run largely by pious middle-class women and held regularly scheduled religious services. In addition to providing a home for prostitutes, the shelter served free meals and provided temporary lodging to homeless women. 18 The shelter seems to have been somewhat more successful than the Woman's Aid Society, perhaps because it treated its clients with slightly less condescension. It drew more prostitutes than expected in its first year and had to move to larger quarters. But the shelter's clientele was not entirely voluntary. Shelter representatives went to the police station every morning and brought back women arrested for their first vice offenses, whom the police usually chose not to bring to trial. Other prostitutes were discharged by the police court judge into the care of the shelter. Police brought some women directly to the shelter instead of arresting them. 19 Hartford's third shelter for prostitutes—and its largest—was the House of the Good Shepherd. This establishment, which opened in 1902 in the suburban West End of Hartford, was run by the sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd. In some respects its goals were similar to those of the Woman's Aid Society. Its professed aim was "to provide a shelter for girls and women of dissolute habits, who wish to do penance for their iniquities and to lead a truly Christian life." It also shared much of the Woman's Aid Society's condescension. The girls were never considered the sisters' equals. Those reformed prostitutes who wished to stay under the protection of the order for life could never even become sisters, but instead joined the subordinate class of "Magdalen." Like the Shelter for Women, the House of the Good Shepherd enjoyed a cooperative relationship with law enforcement officials. In addition to admitting some prostitutes who voluntarily surrendered themselves, it received many who were committed by court order.20

These three organizations may have helped reform some prostitutes, but they by no means attempted to rid Hartford of prostitution. There were always scores of fallen women who would spurn the helping hand extended to them and jeer at the middle-class morality of their would-be rescuers. Asked whether she would take refuge at the Shelter for Women after her brothel closed in 1911, one woman "said that when she was ready to die she might consider it." 21

Gold Street

In addition to these attempts to save individual prostitutes, a second significant reform campaign in the late nineteenth century aimed at cleaning up a small neighborhood outside the red-light district. Reformers in the 1890s successfully swept vice and poverty out of Gold Street, which ran west from Main Street to Bushnell Park.

In 1880, the Common Council received a petition from nearby property owners to widen and otherwise improve the street and to demolish the buildings on the north side. The petitioners described Gold Street as
Gold Street in the 1890s, before the demolition of the tenements on the north side (left). (Connecticut State Library)

"a narrow, filthy and at times an almost impassable lane; chiefly occupied by stables and negro tenement houses, and houses of ill fame, making a nuisance, in the heart of the city." Clearing away the tenements for a beautiful new street would thus remove a host of problems while improving traffic flow, they argued.23 The city fathers balked at such a massive undertaking, but the idea did not go away. To the calls for improving traffic and social conditions, reformers in the 1890s added a third reason for initiating such a project: to redeem the surroundings of the Old Burying Ground, where lay the bones of Hartford's earliest settlers. It was bad enough, thought some respectable citizens, that a reeking slum stood between Main Street and the park; it was intolerable that the slum bordered their ancestors' graves. Descendants could not pay their respects without passing gambling dens and tenements, from whose windows prostitutes solicited passersby.24

The local Daughters of the American Revolution took up the cause in 1895, led by Emily S. G. Holcombe, the chapter's regent and the wife of a local insurance executive. The direct descendant of one of the first settlers of Hartford, Emily Seymour Goodwin grew up in Brooklyn, married John M. Holcombe in 1873, and settled on the eastern slope of Asylum Hill. A genial, gracious woman, active in the social life of the local elite, she helped found the Hartford chapter of the D.A.R. in 1892 and remained involved for the next two decades in various projects to commemorate the colonial history of Connecticut and its capital city. She was among the original members of the Municipal Art Society, the local City Beautiful organization founded in 1904, and her husband later served as president. During the society's fight to prevent the demolition of the Old State House in 1909, Emily Holcombe raised money for the building's restoration.25

In 1895 Holcombe invited the Rev. George Leon Walker to present a paper to the D.A.R. about the Burying Ground. "How could we leave such a spot to its present obscurity, ignominy, and neglect?" Walker asked his audience, the prosperous Yankee women whose families still represented political and economic power in the increasingly diverse city. "Honored and sacred to the last spoonful of its dust should be all that remains of that place of tears and of hope laid out by our forefathers." Far from honoring the sacred soil behind their tenements, he lamented, the denizens of Gold Street regularly enriched it by flinging the contents of their chamberpots out their back windows, along with tin cans and old shoes. The very least the city could do, Walker said, would be to knock
down buildings on the north side of the street and create a sunny front lawn for the cemetery.35

Her sense of obligation to her family, Holcombe wrote later, inspired her to get involved in such a public project. She had remembered visiting the Burying Ground with her father, who had pointed out family names on the stones. Saving the graveyard, she thought, would be “an affectionate memorial to an honored father, and the glad fulfillment of what I believed would be his wish.” Thus her work would not go beyond feminine norms. Still, Holcombe was concerned about “what opprobrium might result” from even such nonconfrontational trespassing in the male world of public affairs. Only after seeking the advice of “some wise men” did she set to work in 1896 and 1897 raising part of the cost of demolishing the buildings. Appealing discreetly to prominent local businessmen, editors, clergy, club members, the Hartford public, and far-flung descendants of the dishonored dead, her organization raised what eventually amounted to $35,600. The money of Hartford’s better classes accomplished what the city government alone could not. “Like a full tide it flowed in, cleansing, purifying and wiping away the stain of long reproach to our fair city,” Holcombe wrote.36

Exactly what that stain was, Holcombe forbore to mention. She acknowledged that “moral as well as material filth desecrated the very atmosphere,” but she preferred to emphasize the graveyard’s glorious future as a source of civic pride.37 The Common Council gave final approval for the work in October 1898. Demolition of the buildings began the following April, watched resentfully by former tenants. The Hartford Post mockingly quoted an elderly black woman in the crowd: “I brung up all ma chillen down hyar ... and ma ole man died hyar. I didn’t never expect to have to move and I was a figgin’ on stayin’ right hyar till I died. There never was no place so comfortable and handy and it’s too bad to tear down such mighty good buildin’s. I don’t see no use in such foolishness nohow.” But lower-class complaints were easily ignored, and the evicted tenants were left to fend for themselves. Demolition was completed in May. The D.A.R. then set to work restoring the gravestones and arranging for the construction of a fence and an elaborate gateway that created a monument to the importance of Hartford’s Yankee establishment. In this way, the space gained a new didactic function, reinforcing rather than subverting the social order.38

The Pastors’ Crusade

Establishing the shelters and cleaning up the neighborhood around the Old Burying Ground did represent steps toward treating prostitution as a public problem rather than a personal one, but the women reformers were cautious. Though their work addressed one of the more unpleasant effects of women’s subordination and brought the reformers themselves into the public sphere, the ladies spoke in terms that affirmed traditional gender norms. Most important, they did not challenge the toleration of a vice district—or the ideology that allowed such a division of public space.

The red-light district was first seriously questioned on other grounds by local pastors in 1907. Antiprophitition reform had been a traditional concern among Protestant pastors in Hartford as in other cities. Clergymen in other cities, particularly New York, were at the fore of late nineteenth-century campaigns to encourage moral purity and to lead semivigilante “preventive societies” against vice. Hartford pastors had been working quietly to rescue prostitutes and place them in private homes long before female reformers opened the first shelter. They organized the City Missionary Society in 1851 and used it to coordinate their previously individual rescue efforts.39 Clergymen formed the Hartford Federation of Churches in 1900 and set up the federation’s “Committee on Public Morals” to battle vice more directly. The committee hired a detective agency in 1906 to help it investigate prostitution in Hartford, presenting its findings to Mayor William F. Henney in a private letter late that year.40

The pastors’ aversion to publicizing their findings reflected their fear that vice was already too public. Their letter described several interrelated forms of vice that had edged into both semipublic commercial places and the streets. They noted after-hours liquor sales even in a large hotel, as well as “gambling without much effort at concealment” at saloons. They were greatly troubled by lewd behavior in the curtained booths of saloons, theater cafes, and hotels, where prostitutes solicited clients before taking them to “bed houses” or to hotel rooms. The clergymen feared the erosion of boundaries between depravity and virtue. They noted the State Street brothels, but they were more disturbed by the illicit use of seemingly respectable hotels. Furthermore, “the
number of women of this class upon our streets is very noticeable. Our agent was accosted by eleven such women on the street in three evenings. . . . Why is it, Mr. Mayor, that vice dares to so flaunt itself in our open streets?” This letter did not demand that the red-light district be closed, calling only for an end to streetwalking and for better enforcement of liquor laws.

The clergymen concluded by arguing that police had forged a deeply troubling alliance with sin. Mistaking the pastors’ detectives for sporting men, police had obligingly directed them to gambling halls and bordelloes. Moreover,

In talking with an officer, and a plain clothes man, our agents learned that the houses of prostitution were protected and that the policemen profited by this form of vice. Members of our police department stated to our detectives, that “they made it hot for women who did not cough up and mentioned several instances [sic].” Our agent also learned from members of our police force “that in other cities they have a go between who collects the graft, but here we have to go and get it for ourselves.”

Months passed, and the city’s response seemed lethargic at best. Mayor Henney, a Republican, was a reformist on matters of orderly administration and civic beautification, but he was apparently unwilling to disturb established patterns of law enforcement. On 19 May 1907, the Federation of Churches reluctantly took its cause to the public. Four pastors used their Sunday sermons to inveigh against vice, drawing details from the previous autumn’s investigation. Their sermons received extensive coverage in the newspapers the next day.

The clergymen were blunt in their criticism of the police and the vice trade, but ambiguous about whether they wanted prostitution suppressed entirely or simply forced to operate in semiprivate buildings within a narrowly bounded district. The Rev. Harry E. Peabody, the chairman of the public morals committee, called for closing the “vicious resorts.” He placed more emphasis, however, on the “hotels and restaurants and saloons not in the restricted district but on our main streets, where vice and crime ply their trade, insolent, aggressive and unrebuked.” Peabody said vice posed particular dangers when it ventured outside the district, because young people going to theaters downtown might be unaware of the evil influences surrounding them. He called on public-spirited Christians to see that “vice and crime . . . at least sink back into their dens.” City officials took advantage of this waffling and deflected attention from the policy of a tolerated vice district. They narrowed the issue to corruption alone and claimed to be shocked at hearing that gambling and prostitution were aided by police. The Board of Police Commissioners demanded that the ministers produce evidence for such accusations, and the pastors found themselves on the defensive.

Five more pastors spoke out on vice the next Sunday, trying to regain control of the issue by taking a more aggressive stance. The Rev. Elmer A. Dent protested the attempt to distract attention from the immoral conditions. He and the Rev. Henry H. Kelsey directly attacked Chief Gunn’s policy toward East Side vice. Kelsey likened tolerating prostitution to tolerating typhoid fever: in both cases, contagion would inevitably spread.

The Rev. Peabody met the next day with Prosecuting Attorney Harrison B. Freeman, Jr., and apparently secured Freeman’s agreement to crack down on prostitution. In July, acting on Freeman’s warrants, police conducted a Saturday night vice raid in which seventy people were arrested. Nine of the ten brothels raided were on State Street. In police court Freeman declared that he was serious about cleaning up State Street, and would continue to order raids if the brothels reopened. But he did not promise to suppress vice throughout Hartford or even throughout the East Side. He intended, rather, to change the boundaries of the vice district to keep prostitution off the main streets. Referring to changes in the traffic patterns that would follow the completion of the new Connecticut River bridge the next year, Freeman said, “The new boulevard will soon be put through State street, and I am determined that the street will be cleaned out.” The judge then astonished the crowded courtroom by sentencing seven of the ten madams to prison for three months each.

Though shaken, the red-light district survived the 1907 crusade. By 1909, when police conducted another big raid, the results of the vice crusade were obvious: brothels were no longer found on State Street but were quietly flourishing in less heavily traveled parts of the East Side. Yet despite its limited results, the pastors’ crusade had decisively redefined prostitution as a menace to everyone. The social evil, they argued, invaded the public spaces of the city, tempted the young, and corrupted the guardians of order. The pastors had also succeeded in directing the
power of city government into an area of moral reform previously left to private organizations. Their new approach to the issue raised difficult questions. Should prostitution be controlled by segregating it, or did segregation mean a craven accommodation with the forces of evil? If Hartford was to have "public women," how publicly could they pursue their trade? Was vice considered to be flaunting itself only if it strayed from the East Side?

The clergymen offered confused and contradictory answers to these questions, but underlying their arguments was the common belief that it was impossible to purify all of Hartford. Vice either could be chased from public view into the East Side brothel, or it could be attacked in the brothel at the risk of pushing it into the street. Initially, the public morals committee had merely emphasized public morality. The Rev. Peabody, who was the most alarmed about the spread of vice into the main streets, had implied that he would tolerate the existence of prostitution behind closed doors on side streets in the slums. On the other hand, the Rev. Dent, who assailed the idea of any sort of vice district, simultaneously urged respectable people to retreat from public space. The public streets posed too many temptations for young people, he said. The best solution for both men and women was to take refuge in familial privacy. "Mothers, fathers, make your houses homes. Keep the boys and girls off the streets." Thus, while Dent was calling for total war against the brothels, he was implicitly surrendering the regular thoroughfares to the forces of evil.

Dent was troubled by the growth of commercial leisure activities, especially mixed-sex downtown nightlife. Nighttime had once been so closely associated with vice that the term "nightwalker" was a euphemism for "prostitute." But that connection became muddled in Hartford, as in other cities, in the late nineteenth century. Commercial amusements were drawing more and more people into the public spaces of the city at night, partly as a result of increased leisure time and partly because new electric street lighting dispelled some of the darkness. Hartford had begun replacing its old gas lamps with bright new electric streetlights in 1885, completing the change by 1890. The downtown now became a liminal new world after the sun set—neither dark nor light—where it was unclear which moral conditions would prevail. By 1907 it was evident that this confusing new space was drawing disproportionately large numbers of people in their late adolescence and early adulthood—an impressionable age before the moral character was set, in Dent's view. Every evening, young theatergoers would flock downtown to enjoy vaudeville, burlesque, drama, musical comedy, and motion pictures. The largest theater at this time was Parson's, noted by the pastors for its scandalous private booths. Dance halls were also becoming popular at this time. (A later study found that the halls were pickup places for young working-class men and women, who would indulge in "demoralizing" new dances before leaving together.) Some dancers and theatergoers lingered downtown afterward in the hotel barrooms and in the numerous saloons there on the East Side. Such activities created a libertine atmosphere, Dent warned in his May 26 sermon. "At midnight . . . the saloons close and turn out their raft of iniquity upon our streets, a menace to our peace and good name. Hartford has the unenviable reputation of having an exceptionally large number of well dressed young people upon its streets at or after midnight. There is an unusual amount of tippling and drunkenness among this class."42

Though stated in overwrought terms, Dent's concerns about commercial leisure were not entirely misplaced. As the historian Kathy Peiss has shown, shopgirls and other working-class women eagerly used the dance halls and other "cheap amusements" in constructing new gender identities that clashed with the expectations of their parents and of moralistic reformers. The freer sexuality fostered in such places often strayed into the blurry margins of prostitution. Hartford investigators of prostitution heard in 1913 from several women whose love of commercial entertainment had led them to turn dating into a lucrative profession. "She likes to go to dances and the theaters and to have pretty things," the investigators noted of one woman. Of another, they wrote: "She does not care for home life; likes excitement."43

Dent was also accurate in linking the influence of commercial leisure with the growth in female employment. Hartford department stores and offices were hiring more and more women, freeing them from the constraints of "home life" and giving them the money they needed to go out. Dent feared most of all for country girls who came to work in the city, away from the supervision of their families. Women's role in society was undergoing alarming changes. "No day in the history of our country so darkens the moral stamina as ours. Women crowd into public life and public
employment. They meet and fall before unaccustomed temptations."  

On the moral map of Hartford, he felt, all the reassuring old boundaries were now frighteningly blurred.

Women on the Streets

While working-class women were challenging bourgeois gender norms by their presence in dance halls, streets, and workplaces, middle-class women were also crowding into public life in threatening new ways. Among these invaders were the militant suffragists of the Hartford Equal Franchise League. Under the leadership of Katharine Houghton Hepburn, these women would wage a successful battle to abolish the red-light district forever. The suffragists followed the pastors' precedent in calling vice a public menace and seeking government action, but they differed in arguing that it was entangled with larger issues of gender inequality and poverty. In place of the Christian impulse behind earlier antivice efforts, the suffragists brought to their work a secular vision of social progress. Segregating the social evil was no solution, they thought, as it merely perpetuated one of the worst forms of women's victimization, and, through the spread of venereal disease, threatened families in better neighborhoods.

Suffragists sought to redefine the feminine role in society without making it approximate the masculine one. They did not want women to follow the shopgirls' example in adopting the easy sexuality common among men. They shared with the shelter leaders a belief in female moral superiority and wanted to end the separation of spheres on terms congenial to ladies. Middle-class women's traditional concern for the health and morality of their families, they thought, demanded that they leave the false security of their homes to clean up public life. In their fight against prostitution and for the vote, Hartford suffragists acted out the new gender roles they desired to establish. They took their struggle to the papers, to the meeting halls, and to the most public part of the public sphere: the city streets. There, fighting a woman's battle on what had been a man's turf, they sought a sweeping victory over the red-light district. Once cleansed of the most flagrant immorality, both private and public space would be safe for respectable ladies and their families—or so the suffragists hoped.

By the time Mayor Edward L. Smith ordered the brothels closed in 1911, Katharine Houghton Hepburn had been concerned about prostitution for several years. Hepburn, born Katharine Martha Houghton in 1878, had grown up outside Buffalo and was the daughter of a prominent businessman. Her father committed suicide when she was fourteen, her mother died of cancer eighteen months later, and Katharine was left in the care of relatives. Aloof, haughty, and secretly insecure, she became a sort of mother to her two younger sisters, insisting against the wishes of her guardians that all three of them receive high-quality schooling, including college educations at Bryn Mawr. She worked briefly as a schoolteacher after her graduation, then married Dr. Thomas N. Hepburn in 1904, settled with him on Hartford's Asylum Hill, and began raising a family. Encouraged by her sister Edith, Katharine Hepburn and her husband both became involved in social reform. Thomas Hepburn shared the growing concern among urologists at this time that men infected with syphilis and gonorrhea were spreading the disease to their innocent wives and unborn children. To many this danger symbolized a threat to the well-being of the family, a threat they associated with the city and the urban masses. Contagion bred in the immigrant slums could easily spread to the most secluded, middle-class home. Thomas Hepburn wrote an article in 1908 attacking regulated prostitution and was a founding member of the Connecticut Society for Social Hygiene in 1910. Katharine Hepburn served briefly in the Woman's Aid Society and then in her husband's organization. She joined the suffrage cause around 1908 and took up the issue of prostitution in her first speech. In 1909, as vice president of the Connecticut Woman Suffrage Association (CWSA), she gave a speech to the membership about venereal disease.

Hepburn's remarks on prostitution and her speech about venereal disease startled the staid members of the CWSA, she would not have minded. She was at the head of what one of her supporters called a "younger, enthusiastic and militant group" inspired by the aggressive English suffragism of Emmeline Pankhurst. Her Hartford Equal Franchise League, which stood apart from the older Hartford Equal Rights Club, was interested in broad social reform and was not content to ask meekly for the vote. As president of the CWSA in 1910–11 and 1913–17, Hepburn was a dynamic speaker who relished controversy. She resigned the CWSA presidency in 1917 in disgust with the cautious policies of the
ballet for women would raise their political and consequently their economic status, and would so diminish the number of women who are driven into prostitution through unendurably long hours of work and starvation wages." Working-class women needed protective legislation, which they could secure more easily if all women had the vote. Hepburn also acknowledged the oppressive class relations involved in prostitution—many clients were from wealthier backgrounds than the prostitutes. Fragmentary arrest records from 1910, and data from the 1913 Report of the Hartford Vice Commission, support her view. The evidence indicates that Hartford prostitutes at this time were typically young, native-born white women from working- or lower-class backgrounds.32

On the other hand, along with her concern for working women, Hepburn held to a modified version of the middle-class belief that women were the defenders of the home, the family, and morality. In promotional literature for the CWSA, she chose to be depicted in her maternal role: one photograph shows her surrounded by her children, while another has her seated in a madonna-like pose, gazing down at the baby in her arms.33 Recounting her antiprostitution campaign in a 1914 speech, she explained that her group had seen the need for women of all classes to accelerate an ongoing redefinition of motherhood and to take a more public role in order to fulfill traditional obligations:

Many of us were mothers who had little boys that we should some day send out into the city. And I want to ask the women in this audience, "How much chance do you think you will have with your boys even if you have brought them up as most mothers of our generation are doing . . . [even] if you have taught them that the foundation for the double standard of morality is a lie . . . how much chance, I ask you, do you think there is that your point of view will prevail if when the boy goes out into the outside world, into the man's world where the woman's point of view does not count directly, he finds that—from the mayor to the chief of police down to the patrolman on his beat—every one of these public officials knowingly sanctions in certain parts of the city the buying and selling of women at all hours of the day and night? And if you feel that your boy is not safe, how must the mother in the poorer districts feel whose girl is in danger too? How must the mother feel who is trying to bring up her little

parent organization, the National American Woman Suffrage Association, and gave her support to the National Woman's Party of Alice Paul.31

Hepburn saw the fight against prostitution as a woman's issue that transcended the class interests of genteel reformers like herself. Her argument on this point was double. On the one hand, she urged the improvement of women's standing in the paid workforce and drew on Progressive Era ideas about the need for an interventionist state. "The
daughter against the terrible odds of long hours of labor and low wages... when she realizes that it is in her immediate neighborhood that these houses are 'segregated.'”

Hepburn believed that middle-class constructs of femininity were shared by all classes. In fact, she added, “The women living in the slums were the most to be depended on to take a right view of these questions. They never once told us that the tolerance of houses of ill-name 'protects good women.' They knew very well that the boys and men—many of them married men—whom they saw come down to these houses from the better districts, did not carry back protection to the women that they were supposed to love and cherish, but that they carried back disease and death.” Both strands of Hepburn’s argument assumed that women differed from men in fundamental ways. Women had special needs and moral concerns that were not respected either in male-dominated government or in male-dominated public space. Hepburn's antiprostitution efforts reflected a broader contemporary rhetoric and ideology that historians have described as “maternalist”—advocating the extension throughout society of the values that mothers were thought to represent within the home.55

Since they believed the issues to be inextricably intertwined, Hepburn and her supporters intended to press forward simultaneously on both suffrage and antiprostitution work, but like other observers in Hartford in 1912 they could see that a fight against prostitution would not be easy. When Smith ordered the brothels closed, Hepburn later recalled, “People began saying ‘They will open up in a little while. It was just like this two years ago and everything opened up again as soon as things quieted down.’” Smith himself had avoided making extravagant predictions. “No reasonable man will expect that the adoption and enforcement of this policy will accomplish the impossible,” he said. “To be successful it needs the support of public opinion that is strong and persistent.”57

Initial indications were that public opinion might not support a determined campaign against tolerated vice. “Some things can be regulated but not wholly suppressed,” asserted the Times. The Times printed letters from several readers who staunchly defended the segregated district for keeping prostitutes off the streets and out of the better neighborhoods.
country. The Hartford suffragists also began organizing a mass meeting to be held in Parsons Theater later that month. To publicize the event, they printed ten thousand handbills for distribution throughout the city, warning mothers of the dangers that "white slavery" posed to innocent girls. Their emphasis on white slavery reflected a nationwide fear at the time that many prostitutes were literally sexual slaves. Such a view of prostitution appealed to many female reformers throughout America, since it put the full blame on men and bolstered the claim that women were morally superior. Hepburn’s group posted billboards with the message, "The White Slave Traffic. What It Is. The Results. What To Do," along with the date and the location of the meeting. By the day of the mass meeting, city officials were still debating whether to push forward with the vice commission, and the Times and the Courant remained hostile to the suffragists’ goals and tactics.50

The meeting, which drew a predominantly female audience of about fifteen hundred, was organized as a demonstration of women’s power. The hall was decorated with the suffrage colors white, green, and purple. Those entering were ushered to their seats by women “wearing regalia inscribed with the words ‘Knowledge is Power.’" Hepburn recalled. The event drew women not only from Asylum Hill but also from the working-class immigrant neighborhoods. One reporter noted a conspicuous number of “young Hebrew girls.” Other women had come from distant parts of the state, Hepburn recalled, “a striking demonstration of the solidarity of women when a great moral issue is at stake.” Mayor Smith, who had been asked to serve as chairman of the meeting, was clearly uneasy about the atmosphere. “Hysterics never assist us very much,” he warned the crowd. He listened to the speeches denouncing vice districts, but stepped down as chairman when the audience voted on a resolution protesting “the cowardly action of certain of our public officials.”51

The advertising, the mass meeting, and the symbolic vote were just the beginning of an uncompromising assertion of middle-class women’s right to enter the public sphere. The Equal Franchise League kept the issues of prostitution and woman suffrage in the public eye throughout the early months of 1912 by holding weekday afternoon rallies on downtown street corners—hitherto places where decent ladies had not gathered. In holding street rallies, the suffragists were following the example not only of Pankhurst, but of Hartford’s working-class women. A year earlier, immigrant women had taken to the streets in protest as part of a garment workers’ strike; they heckled scabs and picketed in front of Main Street department stores.52

Pankhurst and the garment workers were arrested; Hepburn’s suffragists were not. The Hartford Post, sympathetic to their cause, described one of the rallies this way: “The meeting was an orderly one, there being several hundred men and women present. An officer kept the sidewalk clear sufficiently for those to pass by who wished, but the majority remained to listen to the arguments.” At one of the rallies, Hepburn announced that the Equal Franchise League would make prostitution and tenement conditions prominent issues in the municipal election that spring. Just before the election, the suffragists held another mass meeting at which the audience resolved to ask the mayoral candidates to announce their position on enforcing vice laws. The candidates dodged the question, but the one who seemed least sympathetic—Democrat Thomas J. Spellacy—was defeated. Under Republican Mayor Louis R. Cheney, the Hartford Vice Commission was allowed to do its work.53

The vice commission’s report, completed in 1913, claimed that the closing of the brothels had indeed reduced prostitution in Hartford. Contrary to skeptics’ dire predictions, the closing had neither resulted in more streetwalking nor caused increased vice in other neighborhoods. The report recommended stricter laws and enforcement policies, the hiring of female police officers, and the end to all “discrimination in respect to sex or social standing in the efforts to suppress the social evil.” The suffragists were pleased with the report and eager to see it disseminated, but city officials had other ideas. They told the city clerk to do his utmost to keep copies of the report out of “improper hands” and to prevent any copies from being sent out of Hartford. Within two days, the five hundred copies that had all been handed out, and no more were available.54 The suffragists smelled a cover-up and hit on an idea to thwart it. They reprinted the report and sold it for 25 cents per copy at the CWSA headquarters on Pratt Street, in the heart of the downtown shopping district. A large sign, conspicuously posted in the show window, drew in passersby. Hepburn wanted everyone in Hartford to read the report, and ordered additional printings when the first one ran out.55

The Common Council refused to act on any of the Vice Commission’s recommendations,56 but once again, the suffragists made the issue
 plainly visible in the street. Pedestrians could not help but notice the enormous sign that filled the CWSA show window that autumn: "Mothers of Hartford: Do You Know How the Following Members of the City Council Who Claim to Represent You in Regard to the Suppression of Commercialized Vice in Your City[?]" The sign listed the names and addresses of the twenty-four councilmen who had voted against keeping the brothels closed. Another sign invited the curious, "Come In and Get a Pamphlet Free." Hepburn expected this to be a very effective pressure tactic, especially once the wives and daughters of the councilmen saw the sign. "People going by would see it, stop short, read the names, and then come in and get a copy of the pamphlet. We distributed thousands of them." 67

By this point Hepburn sensed victory. Noting in December 1913 that the brothels had stayed closed for nearly two years, she said, "We have broken down the ban against a free discussion of such subjects and by airing and letting the light in on these dark spots have cleansed Hartford." Though the councilmen held their ground, the suffragists campaigned against them in the April 1914 city election. They posted a blacklist, headed "A Disgrace," with the names of seventeen councilmen who were seeking reelection after refusing to support the brothel closings. The suffragists asked mayoral candidates to declare whether they favored the current policy of suppressing vice and whether they favored the recommendations of the Vice Commission. This time the candidates decided they could not ignore the issue. Both men answered that they agreed with the current policy and with most of the Vice Commission's recommendations. Their responses were published in the press. 68

Although the suffragists were disappointed that fifteen of the blacklisted councilmen were reelected in April, they were cheered by newly elected Mayor Joseph H. Lawler's announcement that he would "insist upon the rigid suppression of vice in all its forms." A Democrat, representing a party dominated locally by immigrant-stock Catholics and Jews, Lawler had been regarded with suspicion by some of the middle-class Protestant reformers. Though the previous Democratic mayor, Edward L. Smith, had been the one to close the brothels, the party was controlled by chairman Thomas Spellacy, who had shown little interest in fighting vice during his own 1912 run for mayor. Lawler, however, represented the more reformist "new line" faction in the local Democratic party; he had won the Democratic nomination only by defeating the "old line" Spellacy in a primary. Antiproprietorism was truly a nonpartisan issue in Hartford, supported by some Democrats and opposed by some Republicans, much like other reforms during this period of alternating party rule and internal party conflict. In any case, Lawler's support guaranteed the success of Hepburn's campaign. Hepburn boasted later that year that "continuous agitation has made it impossible to open up the houses again. . . . Women have the weapon of publicity now and it is a powerful one." 69

The women capped their success with a spectacular suffrage parade on May 2 that featured hundreds of marchers, brass bands, and allegorical floats. "We prepare children for the world. Let us help prepare the world for children," read one banner. In their official parade program, the suffragists declared that they were struggling to adapt women's political role to modern social conditions. "The revolution in women's work makes votes for women a practical necessity," it read. "As women's work has gone out of the home into the factory many women have been forced to follow. . . . The women who are left in the home are trying to bring up their children and to keep their homes free from evil influences both physical and moral. . . . Yet women have no voice in making the laws which for good or for evil so vitally affect their work." The parade was reportedly one of the biggest in Hartford's history. Thousands of spectators thronged the sidewalks along the entire parade route. Suffragists, Hepburn declared, had learned how important it was "to carry their propaganda to men on the street." 70

The Dispersion of Vice

The suffragists' victory proved to be lasting but hollow. To their satisfaction, the tolerated vice district never reopened, either in the crowded brick blocks of the immigrant East Side or anywhere else. When speculation to the contrary surfaced in 1918, Mayor Richard J. Kinsella emphatically denied it. Later accounts of the Progressive-Era vice campaigns, written in 1925 and 1931, agreed that the period from 1911 to 1914 marked the end of the red-light district. 71

Similar changes were taking place in cities across the country in response to public pressure, but prostitution itself—though in decline for
other reasons—persisted. The historian Barbara Meil Hobson has argued that “turning out the red lights and dismantling the districts merely dispersed the trade and produced a new set of institutions in the prostitution economy.” This appears to have been true in Hartford, despite the Vice Commission’s denials. The commission’s own evidence showed prostitution, after the brothel closings, to be centered in the commercial downtown. In the winter of 1912–13, investigators asked fifty-one prostitutes where they solicited clients. Their answers indicated that half did at least some soliciting on downtown streets. By far the most popular place to meet clients was on Main Street, where twenty-four of the women said they worked. Asylum Street, another major shopping street, was used by eight prostitutes surveyed. Streets on the East Side drew smaller numbers of women: seven for Front, three for Market, and three for State. (Some women probably worked more than one street.) A man craving an encounter with a prostitute no longer had to sneak down the dirty streets of the poor. He could now find sex for sale beside the bright display windows of Hartford’s finest shops—one consumer choice among many in a district showcasing the voluptuous pleasure of spending. Nor were other prostitutes working much more privately. With the brothels closed, they had little choice but to solicit in places not specifically reserved for them, such as restaurants, saloons, theaters, and the train station. Most prostitutes took clients to hotel rooms or rooming houses.

Brothelkeepers continued to try to reopen in the old red-light district, especially in 1912 and 1913, and streetwalkers continued to solicit there as well as downtown. But news reports and court records after that suggest that prostitution had lost its geographic focus in the riverfront slum and had become common in all parts of the fringe area surrounding the downtown. In the later 1910s, news reports and court documents pertaining to prostitution arrests increasingly gave addresses in the southern half of the city. There was no apparent center of vice. Arrests were made on a wide range of respectable working- and middle-class streets scattered from just south of downtown to the extreme South End. There were also reports that streetwalking was increasing and that streetwalkers were soliciting motorists and performing sexual acts in automobiles.

Prostitution continued to thrive in Hartford without the protection of a red-light district. From the closing of the brothels through the end of the decade, prostitution-related arrests averaged nearly two hundred a year—roughly the same arrest rate as in the years immediately before the brothels closed. Clearly, Mayor Kinsella was exaggerating when he spoke in 1918 of “the exemplary freedom of our City from all forms of vice.” The city was free of vice only in the sense that police no longer granted it a district where it could operate with impunity.

From the shelters for wayward girls to the pastors’ crusade, antiproduction reform in Hartford overtly reaffirmed middle-class gender norms while inadvertently weakening the separation of spheres. In the shelters, middle-class ladies cautiously extended their role as protectors of private morality into a homelike setting for rescuing women from the streets. Emily Holcombe emphasized the familial aspects of the Gold Street project (protecting the graves of ancestors and obeying her father), avoiding any mention of prostitution. Still, her project represented a step by middle-class women into a more public and politicized role and tacitly began to address prostitution’s effects on public space. The pastors’ crusade raised troubling questions about the practical value and moral implications of a segregated vice district. In their inability to agree on a solution, and the limited results of their work, the pastors accidentally exposed the weakness of separate-spheres ideology: the spatial boundaries between public and private, vice and virtue, were impossible to police.

The suffragists shared some of the values of their predecessors in the shelter organizations. They believed, for example, that women had a moral mission and that middle-class ideas of femininity could be applied to all classes. They enthusiastically embraced some of the tactics that Holcombe and the pastors had so reluctantly adopted: the use of publicity to call attention to their campaign and the enlistment of governmental power in their fight for reform. But the suffragists used these tactics more skillfully and persistently than earlier antiproduction reformers had, and they sought a more radical transformation of society—a new role for women, with greater access to public space and public discourse. Far more than any of their predecessors, the suffragists challenged the old dichotomy between virtuous female privacy and the wicked male street. They argued that, regardless of whether prostitution stayed on the East Side or ventured into more reputable areas, regardless
of whether it was hidden in brothels or paraded in public, its very existence threatened everyone in the city. Through the spread of venereal disease, the social evil could attack the families and even the bodies of respectable middle-class women. The problem demanded that women abandon the illusory shelter of their homes and take to the streets to press their cause. The emergency forced them to take daring steps, but success would allow them to feel at home in public; the street would be made an appropriate place for ladies because it would be morally purified. The entire public sphere would be imbued with the values of genteel femininity.

The suffragists gained greater access to public space, but they failed to transform that space as thoroughly as they had desired. Earlier police predictions came true, as closing the red-light district meant the end of an attempt, however ineffectual, to keep vice away from middle-class citizens who sought to avoid it. Having demolished the crumbling barriers that marked out Hartford's moral geography, middle-class women gained the right to leave the private sphere—only to find the world outside the home as impure as ever. Regardless of what Hepburn said in 1913, Hartford was not cleansed.

The sun rose over Hartford each morning on streetcars rattling down country roads and through empty streets toward the department stores and granite office towers downtown. By the time the first ripple of the daily tide of commuters flowed into City Hall Square, an even earlier group of workers was waiting for it: dozens of young newsboys gripping fresh armfuls of papers and clamoring for attention. "Got up at 5:30 in the morning to catch the trolleys coming in from across the river from Manchester and Glastonbury to sell 50 papers to make 50 cents," recalled Anthony Taupena, an East Side Italian boy whose brother was also a "newsie." Many newsies would return to the sidewalks and streetcars after school, joined by other boys and girls, to peddle afternoon papers to the rush hour crowds. Some would stay late into the evening to make a few extra cents from sales in saloons.1

A harried commuter might be grateful for a chance to relax with the news, but a growing number of reformers around the turn of the century saw the presence of these children downtown as a troubling anomaly. By the early 1900s, American educators and reformers were working to