

Resolved, That the report of the Magdalen Society is a gross libel on the moral character of the inhabitants of this city, and that it merits the hearty reprobation of every honest man and woman in this community and in the United States.

-Anti-Magdalen Report, Tammany Hall, New York City, Friday September 9, 1831

Prostitution in New York City has once again become the focus of much public debate and outcry recently. The scandal surrounding Eliot Spitzer's connection to an escort agency is the latest in a long and sordid history of legal and moral panic about New York City's commercial sex industry. Arguably the city's most aggressive attempt to restrict public sexuality and sexual behavior since the nineteenth century was the 1995 legal decision to ban all sexually oriented adult businesses from inhabiting certain neighborhoods.¹ The banned businesses included book and video stores, theatres, peep shows, topless bars and more. Historians have documented the changes in public perception and tolerance of prostitution as well as the various legislative and policy decisions that have occurred over the past two hundred years but little has been written on the city's first moral reform society which gave birth to a much larger Moral Reform Movement. This particular moment in New York City's history marks the first time that issues of sexual 'vice,' immorality, and prostitution were brought to the forefront of public discussion and debate.

Few people living in New York City today would be aware of the New York Magdalen Society. The early, and short lived, voluntary society was first to initiate a social dialogue, and controversy, around prostitution. This paper will demonstrate how the New York Magdalen Society, only operational from 1830 to 1831, attempted to begin a multi-decade "crusade in New York City to curtail sexual deviation."² Following a brief introduction to the religious revival of the time, this essay will focus on the first, and last, annual report of the 1831 Magdalen Society as well as their asylum for penitent prostitutes. The essay will then describe the historical context in which The Magdalen Report was written through a look at the social, legal, and political status of women, prostitutes and non-prostitutes, in the early 1830s. From this social milieu it is possible to more fully understand why the Magdalen Report garnered such public outrage that New Yorkers came together to produce The Anti-Magdalen Report in response. The subsequent downfall of the Magdalen Society and the rise of other reform societies reveal aspects of women's changing role in antebellum New York City. These first public debates on prostitution and sexual morality provide a window into how 1830s America saw femininity, female sexuality, and women's role in society.

Religion, the New York Magdalen Society, and The Magdalen Report

Commonly referred to as the 'Second Great Awakening,' the late 1820s and 1830s signified a religious revival that greatly affected reform and religion in America.³ Led in New York State by Charles Finney, the premise for this revival was that individuals were 'free agents' who could reach salvation, or damnation, through their own doing. Individuals, then, were seen as depraved by their own means and therefore had the power to change their ways. The revival marked a shift from the earlier thinking that God guided individuals and that destinies were pre-determined. Larry Whiteaker argues that there were hundreds of revivals in the early 1800s as denominations competed over new members. He contends that New York City's increase in 'Christian activism' was partly due to changes in Protestant Christianity during this time period.⁴ In 1831 alone, the church increased its number of parishioners by 100,000.⁵ Denominations that emphasized sin as an *individual* phenomenon attracted the largest number of converts. Prior to this switch in ideology, sin was conceived of in the Biblical sense as 'Original Sin' and not something that specific individuals had absolute control over. Churches, such as the Methodists, Baptists, and Calvinists, began to follow the evangelicals and adopt this new doctrine. It was in this religious context that the New York Magdalen Society first began its anti-prostitution crusade. Since sin was perceived as a voluntary act, they believed that it could be eradicated once all individuals had willingly converted.⁶

On January 1, 1830, a group of 26 men, religious leaders, physicians, and merchants founded the New York Magdalen Society.⁷ All but one founding member was an evangelical Protestant.⁸ The society, backed by wealthy high-society women, based itself on Magdalen Societies located in London, England (founded in 1758) and Philadelphia (founded in 1800).⁹ Much has been written about the London and Philadelphia societies, both during their most active times as well

as in the decades following. The New York society received very little attention in comparison to these two much larger and longer standing societies.¹⁰ Indeed, the only surviving document from the New York society is its annual report.¹¹

The Magdalen Report begins with a discussion of the social benefits of 'Sabbath School' – Sunday School. Sabbath Schools, according to the report, functioned due to the efforts of evangelical women. Every Sunday for two years, these religious women went into New York City's Bellevue Female Penitentiary to teach the gospel to convicted women, primarily white women.¹² The Magdalen report states that the Magdalen Society "owes its origins to ... the labour of Sabbath School teachers in this city, and especially in the Female Penitentiary at Bellevue."¹³ Interestingly, the New York Magdalen Society owes its formation to women, and during its year of operation was supported by women, and yet there were no women Officers, Directors, or Executive Committee Members. In future moral reform societies women initiated and employed women in positions that had been traditionally male dominated, for example bookkeeping. According to its annual report, the New York Magdalen Society had two primary activities during 1831. First was the operation of an asylum for penitent prostitutes. The asylum was dedicated to "females who have deviated from the paths of virtue, and are desirous of being restored to a respectable station in society, by religious instruction and the formation of moral and industrious habits."¹⁴ Women were brought to the asylum directly from Bellevue Penitentiary to begin their religious instruction. The asylum was not only a 'refuge from misery' but also a 'school of virtue' for women who were looking to leave prostitution and 'immorality.'¹⁵

The Magdalen Society's second major activity was their regular visits to New York's poor communities where they

... visited brothels, conversed closely and feelingly with the women, presented them with Bibles and Tracts, and laboured to teach those to read who could not, prayed with them, and informed them that a way was now opened through the mercy of God for their rescue out of the misery into which their crimes had placed them.¹⁶

It was through these regular missionary visits that the society members began to expand their focus from strictly conversion to include efforts of prevention.¹⁷ If prevention could stop prostitution from occurring altogether their conversion work would be unnecessary. By working on both fronts, conversion and prevention, Magdalen Society members were hopeful that they could have a profound impact on vice in the city.

The Magdalen Society states that their operational goal was to "reclaim such females as have strayed from the paths of virtue, and to take measures to prevent the progress of prostitution."¹⁸ Members of the society felt it their moral obligation to notify the general public of the prevalence of prostitution and "the dangers that sexual deviation presented."¹⁹ Prior to the release of their annual report it was commonly understood in New York City that 'respectable' citizens were not to engage in discussions that concerned sexual matters. Whiteaker argues that this lack of open discussion about sexuality allowed for individuals to enact their sexuality in a variety of ways without fear of public scorn or disapproval.²⁰

New York City, Prostitution, and the Five Points

In the early 1830s, New York City's rapidly increasing population was roughly 200,000. Before the Civil War, the city did not have any particular red light districts or racialized ghettos.²¹ In antebellum New York City, as the population of immigrants increased, segregation actually decreased. Historians have speculated that this unique trend was due to the limited size of the island. Historian Marilyn Wood Hill writes, "New Yorkers appeared to be very flexible about making residential shifts in responding to the city's growth, and they appeared to worry little about who their neighbors were."²² It wasn't until after the Civil War, as the city developed, that economically and racially segregated areas appeared.²³

At the time that the Magdalen Report was written and distributed, prostitution was a highly visible public activity in New York City. Timothy J. Gilfoyle demonstrates the prevalence of prostitution as well as the tacit acceptance of the profession in his book, City of Eros: New York City and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790 – 1920. He shows the many different ways and locations from which prostitutes solicited clients, from theatres and concert halls, to brothel guidebooks, newspapers, and business cards.²⁴ He argues that while there were particularly notorious areas

of the city in which middle-class citizens considered prostitution to be rampant, prostitutes and brothels were, in fact, spread fairly evenly throughout the urban area of the city.²⁵ The Magdalen Report states that 'houses of ill-repute' were located next door to affluent family homes:

Many of these sinks of iniquity are in respectable neighbourhoods, disguised under the mask of boarding houses, dress makers, milliners, stores and shops of various kinds. Some of these are large and elegant houses, provided with costly furniture, and have brass and silver plates on the doors, on which are engraved the real or fictitious names of the occupants.²⁶

While current historians have agreed that prostitutes worked in every area of the city, certain districts had a reputation for greater vice and immorality. The Five Points was the most notable. The Five Points was considered by many in the early 1830s to be the city's most infamous slum. It was thought of as a "rendezvous for thieves and prostitutes."²⁷ Built on land made up of swamp and shoreline, located between Broadway and the Bowery, it was in this particular area of the city that the early moral reformers chose to focus the majority of their efforts.²⁸ Current historians have described it as:

... a lurid geographical cancer filled with dilapidated and unliveable tenement houses, gang extortion, corrupt politicians, houses of ill-repute and drunkenness and gambling. This was a place where all manner of crime flourished, the residents terrorized and squalor prevailed.

This is the setting over many decades through the nineteenth century.²⁹

Notably, the Five Points was also the most racially and culturally diverse area of antebellum New York City. Thousands of immigrants, primarily Irish, arrived yearly and added to the social organization, culture, promiscuity, and poverty of the area.³⁰ African Americans, some fleeing slavery and others recently freed, lived in relative independence and autonomy and they were able to achieve varying degrees of success.³¹ Interestingly, Whiteaker argues that people living outside the Five Points objected more to its noise and commotion and less to its prostitution. Public drunkenness and open stores on Sunday were more alarming to those living outside the area than brothels.³²

Prostitutes working in the Five Points, as well as other areas of the city, came from diverse backgrounds and from all social classes.³³ Travel accounts and newspapers from the era indicate that prostitutes worked mainly on the streets and clients were predominantly transient seamen.³⁴

According to Gilfoyle, the majority of prostitutes were either American born or Irish immigrants with others from a range of racialized backgrounds including large numbers of African American women. His research documents the trend of recent immigrant women to work as streetwalkers and American born women to work in brothels.³⁵ In spite of the women's ethnic backgrounds it was possible (although more possible for some than for others) to achieve success in the trade. For instance, even though African American prostitutes faced the constraints of racism, some of these women became brothel owners and managed to live comfortably on their earnings.³⁶

Women and the Law

Marilyn Wood Hill argues in her formidable text, *Their Sisters' Keepers: Prostitution in New York, 1830 – 1870*, that prostitution in New York City was at a particular and unique juncture in its history during the mid 1800s. She demonstrates that certain prostitutes were able to gain a noteworthy amount of control over their profession and were therefore able to "reap meaningful economic rewards."³⁷ Despite the socio-legal limitations placed on all women in the early 19th century, prostitutes, especially white prostitutes, were sometimes able to manipulate the system in more effective ways than their working or married non-prostitute sisters. Through the cunning maneuvering of the legal system they created opportunities for themselves and for those they cared about.³⁸ Some were able to maintain a level of professional, managerial, and economic success that was relatively unheard of for women at the time.

Still, while some prostitutes were able to establish a level of independence, they had to work around an oppressive legal framework in the 1830s. Women, both prostitutes and non-prostitutes, were subjected to police raids and random charges of vagrancy. Though theoretically non-prostitute women had a higher social and legal status, in practice this was not always the case as "restrictions governing the behavior of both could blur this distinction."³⁹ Hill develops this argument by focusing on non-prostitute Matilda Wade's arrest, and subsequent conviction of vagrancy and common prostitution as she walked to her husband's work one evening. Despite her pleas and adamant denial of the charges, Wade was sentenced to six months at the

Blackwell's Island workhouse.⁴⁰ Luckily, after five days in prison, she was released and acquitted of all charges due to the legal challenges set forth by her husband and a city lawyer. This case demonstrates that all women were vulnerable to laws surrounding prostitution, including risk of arrest, harassment, and brutality at the hands of male police officials and public officials.⁴¹ Ironically, married women, while prosecuted by men, were also reliant on them for freedom. Wade, as a married woman, was dependent on her husband and a male lawyer to protect and defend her.

Prostitutes were arguably more adept than other women at manipulating the system to their own advantage. It was relatively common for prostitutes to take clients to court for stolen property and harassment. Prostitutes regularly defended their own interests in court and "were not afraid of being highly visible or of taking public action against another party because they viewed themselves as a part of the public citizenry, not as legal deviants who must function outside the established system."⁴²

In the early part of the 19th century, policing was sporadic and often the responsibility of fellow community members. This created what Hill calls a very 'personalized form of law enforcement.'⁴³ Neighborhood officers laid criminal charges as they deemed necessary; depending on your personal relationship with the local officer you could effectively manipulate the male dominated system. If the local officer didn't see the brothel or streetwalkers as breaking the law, charges would not be laid. Hill reports, "almost always... police had had amicable relationships with the prostitute."⁴⁴ Clearly, despite certain laws and legal practices to the contrary, some prostitutes were able to actively establish an environment in which they were not only exempt from criminal charges but also able to call on police services when needed. Indeed, reformers frequently brought forth complaints about the close ties of prostitutes and officials.⁴⁵

Public response to the Magdalen Report and the Anti-Magdalen Report

Given the social, political and legal context of 1830s New York City, it is not altogether surprising that there was a public outcry over the distribution of the Magdalen Report. The publication and circulation of the report forced individuals to publicly acknowledge and address the issue of prostitution. Shortly after its release, groups of affluent citizens began gathering at Tammany Hall to discuss how to address and refute the report. Numerous public meetings were held over the spring, summer and early fall of 1831. An all male citizens' 'Grand Jury,' appointed throughout the year, made recommendations and finalized decisions as well as facilitated meetings. During the June meeting, the citizens' jury read the original Magdalen Report and were outraged by its insinuations.⁴⁶ The jury's angry sentiments were published in the minutes at the August meeting. Three aspects of the report were particularly upsetting to the male jury. First, was the report's claim that "the number of females in this city, who abandon themselves to prostitution is not less than TEN THOUSAND!!!"⁴⁷ The report stated that this number was derived from the observations of the Alderman and Commissioner at Bellevue.⁴⁸ The second major contentions issue was the overall tone of 'righteous indignation' and the reports implications for 'respectable' families.⁴⁹ It was claimed that 'scores of men and boys' visited the prostitutes and that the prostitutes not only doubled as "domestics, seamstresses, nurses, &c., [sic] in the most respectable families" but were also the "daughters of the wealthy, respectable and pious citizens" of the city.⁵⁰ The report also claimed that many brothels or 'sinks of iniquity' were located next to well-to-do families in established neighborhoods.⁵¹ The third concern was for and about women. The Jury was particularly troubled that innocent and morally pure women who read the report could be grievously and irreparably harmed. The June Grand Jury determined the following by a majority of thirteen to four:

... that the said defamatory publication has been circulated extensively in this city, and left at the dwelling houses of our most respectable citizens; that its contents have caused a blush upon the cheek of the young and innocent female; and the prudent matron, and the affectionate mother hide their faces in shame at the obscene and indecorous details set forth in this highly objectionable publication.⁵²

In August the newly appointed Grand Jury determined that it was their duty to thoroughly investigate the claims set forth in the Magdalen Report.⁵³ A committee was struck to research aspects of the report in order to contest its findings. They called upon the police officers and inspectors of the different city wards to make statements before them in order to obtain, what they

considered to be, precise information on the number of prostitutes. Based on the ward inspectors testimonies, on August 13, 1831, the Jury concluded that “the number of females of lewd and wonton character, of every description, does not exceed fourteen hundred and thirty-eight.”⁵⁴ Given the state of policing in New York City at the time, the new figure of 1,438 could be considered just as suspect as the original figure of 10,000. Reliable and accurate testimonies would be unlikely due to inspectors’ lack of knowledge or possible concealment of numbers. In early September 1831, the Grand Jury appointed two secretaries to compile the proceedings from the June, August and September meetings, along with their own statistical research, and harsh words of criticism for the Magdalen Society, into an eight-page publication. They fittingly titled it the Anti-Magdalen Report. This new report painstakingly challenged the calculations put forth by the Magdalen Society. The Anti-Magdalen report concludes with a “call upon the framers of the Magdalen Report, ... [to] demand from them the proofs of what they have asserted.”⁵⁵ It is unlikely that Magdalen Society members fully understood the extent of the public disapproval their report would garner. Indeed, newspaper editors called the report an ‘obscene book’ filled with ‘indecent calculations.’⁵⁶ Even the former mayor of New York City, Philip Hone, wrote in his diary of the ‘disgraceful document.’⁵⁷ Overt hostility was so great that society members received anonymous threats to their lives and property. After receiving threats that a mob was going to ravage and burn his house, the report’s main author, Dr. David Reese,⁵⁸ publicly denied his authorship through ads in local newspapers.⁵⁹ Some Magdalen Society members denied that threats of violence and months of harassment encouraged them to leave the society, and yet one by one they terminated their memberships. Within a few months of the publication of the Anti-Magdalen Report the New York Magdalen Society disbanded.

The After Effects

The short lived, and highly controversial, Magdalen Society ended “under a cloud of acrimony, disillusionment and community criticism,” yet its activities generated many long-term effects. Future members of New York City’s anti-prostitution crusade based their reform methods on the Magdalen Society’s practices.⁶⁰ The first technique was the rescue or reclamation method, whereby reformers encouraged prostitutes to repent and be ‘rescued’ from their current situation. The second method focused on prevention, where reformers attempted to bar sexual immorality altogether by changing social mores and ideologies.⁶¹ Both practices required grave assumptions on the part of the reformers. Firstly, that prostitutes needed ‘rescuing.’ Secondly, that, once repented, a woman would never again return to prostitution. Thirdly, that prostitution and promiscuity was sexually immoral. Fourthly, that by changing social mores, society would stop its ‘immoral’ behaviours. And finally, that the barring of sexual immorality would cease its existence rather than push it further underground.⁶²

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg argues, in “Beauty, the Beast and the Militant Woman: A Case Study in Sex Roles and Social Stress in Jacksonian America,” that many middle-class white women used the moral reform movement as a way of channeling their frustrations over social inequalities, particularly those inequalities that affected their own daily lives.⁶³ Up until the end of 1832, women supported and were involved in reform societies but did not play a major role in the anti-prostitution crusade.⁶⁴ It was during the mid 1830s and later that the movement underwent a shift in gender dynamics when “a significant number of militant women joined the crusade to establish their right to define - and limit - men’s sexual behavior.”⁶⁵ One of the practices used by the women reformers was to use their print materials to publicly expose the names of men suspected of ‘sexual immorality.’⁶⁶ Interestingly, this was a tactic first threatened in the Magdalen Report, a threat that was not followed through.⁶⁷ The report stated that it had “the *names* of scores of the men and boys who are the seducers of the innocent, or the companions of the polluted.”⁶⁸ In May of 1834, a small group of women, mainly supporters and background members of the now inactive Magdalen Society, met to form the New York Female Moral Reform Society. Similarly, its goals were to convert prostitutes to evangelical Protestantism, but this society included a particular focus on men’s sexual values – a new wave for New York City’s moral reform movement.⁶⁹ This new line of thinking soon paved the way for women in the movement to argue that each and every woman must “re-evaluate her role in society”⁷⁰ and “accept the higher – more feminine – code of Christianity.”⁷¹ Women, it was argued, were more morally pure than men, and therefore had an obligation to leave the confines of the home and work towards greater social purity, especially in the face of male “licentiousness, religious apathy, ... sin of intemperance.”⁷²

Smith-Rosenberg has argued that middle-class white women's new found social responsibility to help purify society and eradicate immorality meant that they "were among the very first American women to challenge their completely passive, home oriented image."⁷³ Of course, prostitute women were defying this image by virtue of their profession long before the female moral reformers. One could make the case that it was in part because of the challenge that prostitutes presented to the image of femininity and female domesticity that female moral reformers chose to target them in an attempt to convert them to purity. Indeed, Gilfoyle argues that it was female prostitution that presented a grave challenge to the 'idyllic sexual morality' of the growing middle class.⁷⁴ While early female moral reformers were pioneering a new way for middle-class white women to be in the world, other women had achieved this earlier. Affluent women, who had previously always had male chaperones, were now traveling independently, publishing, and creating a broader sense of womanhood in their reform activities. Poor women, working-class women, immigrant women and prostitute women had long since been traveling alone, living alone, and working independent of male support.⁷⁵

Conclusion

Robert Riegel studied the changing ways that prostitutes were envisioned in America from 1800 to 1920. He writes:

The attitude of XIXth-century America toward prostitution was rather self-contradictory. One side of the picture was a generally resigned acceptance of the institution as inevitable... The other side was of the story was that all statements made publicly opposed prostitution strenuously and advocated chastity as an attainable ideal.⁷⁶

It was the New York Magdalen Society that finally broke the socially sanctioned silence around prostitution when they addressed their concerns with sexual immorality and vice head on through the publication and distribution of their annual report. The Magdalen Society, during the brief time of its operations, had a tremendous impact on the New York City. It initiated dialogue about a previously taboo topic, opened an asylum for penitent prostitutes, and caused such great public controversy, including threats of mob destruction, that it was eventually forced to disband. The society's first, and last, annual report was deemed dangerously inappropriate and became the focus of public assault and ridicule.

Ironically, while the two reports were positioned as polar opposites at the time, the Magdalen Report and the Anti-Magdalen Report were concerned with similar social issues and gathered evidence in similar ways. Both relied on statistical evidence from city police and esteemed members of the public to provide accurate information on the number of prostitutes. And, both assumed that women, much more so than men, were vulnerable to vice and needed to be shielded from talk of sexual immorality. While women did not occupy positions of public responsibility in the Magdalen Society, the male Officers, Directors, Executive Committee members credited them as the society's originators. Future moral reformers, predominantly women, argued against this particular image of femininity and formed their own societies where they occupied most, if not all, of the positions.

In New York City, in the 1830s, we see the different ways that men positioned and constructed women as well as the ways that women disobeyed their social positioning and social construction. Middle-class women, married and single, were thought to need protection from sexual immorality. In defiance of this, some women went into the city penitentiary every Sunday and went on missionary visits to city slums. Women prostitutes were told that they were depraved and needed rescuing. In response, they used the legal system to charge clients with harassment, abuse and robbery. Of course, not all women were challenging their social and gender roles, nor were all prostitutes vindicated in courts of law. Regardless, antebellum New York City and the beginning of the moral reform movement provide a window into women's changing social roles at the time as well as a window into future debates on prostitution.

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