



This detail from a 1926 photograph of the city (looking west) shows the buildings that were constructed when Houston's vice district was legally established between Buffalo Bayou and West Dallas Street. The area later became part of the site of the Allen Parkway Village public housing complex.

## Thelma Denton and Associates: Houston's Red Light Reservation and a Question of Jim Crow

Thomas C. Mackey

The "vice district" was an accepted feature of many cities in the early twentieth century. Within that area congregated the city's tough saloons, pool rooms, gambling halls, and bawdy houses, along with those who worked in and those who patronized these establishments. Usually the police and the respectable population reached an accommodation with or a toleration of such places. Most of these districts were established simply by long tradition. A few cities, however, established their vice districts by law.<sup>1</sup> Houston created such a district by municipal ordinance in 1908, and Houston authorities chose to apply Jim Crow segregation laws to the district's bawdy houses in the following year. Information about such districts and the women who worked in them can be difficult to find and may raise as many questions as it answers. This article utilizes available evidence to provide an interpretation of the founding of the district and its formal segregation as public policy, as well as

Dr. Thomas C. Mackey is an assistant professor of American history at the University of Louisville and an adjunct professor of legal history at the University of Louisville Law School.

<sup>1</sup>For a discussion of prostitution and vice districts in Texas, see David C. Humphrey, "Prostitution and Public Policy in Austin, Texas, 1870-1915," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 86 (April 1983): 473-516; H. Gordon Frost, *The Gentlemen's Club: The Story of Prostitution in El Paso* (El Paso: Mangan Books, 1983); Richard F. Selcer, *Hell's Half Acre: The Life and Legend of a Red Light District* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1991). For discussions of the Storyville district in New Orleans, see Pamela D. Arceneaux, "Guidebooks to Sin: The Blue Books of Storyville," *Louisiana History* 28 (Fall 1987): 397-405; Stephen Longstreet, *Sportin' House: A History of the New Orleans Sinners and the Birth of Jazz* (Los Angeles: Sherbourne Press, 1965); Al Rose, *Storyville, New Orleans: Being an Authentic Illustrated Account of the Notorious Red-Light District* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1974); Gerilyn G. Tandberg, "Sinning for Silk: Dress-For-Success Fashions of the New Orleans Storyville Prostitutes," *Women's Studies International Forum* 13 (1990): 229-249.

an analysis of the women workers within the district.

In 1910, the United States government conducted its thirteenth census.<sup>2</sup> Census taker E. G. Norton, working the Seventieth Enumeration District in Houston's Fourth Ward, knocked on the front door of a house at 807 Lyons Street on April 23. Thelma Denton, or one of her "Boarders," as the census referred to the three young women residing with her, answered the door and responded to Norton's questions. Norton's notations from that meeting do not indicate whether he spoke to the occupants individually or in a group, but one imagines Norton standing on the front porch of Denton's house near Buffalo Bayou with an occasional wagon or rider passing by on the unimproved street out front. Balancing his oversized census book in one arm, Norton interviewed Denton and her associates.<sup>3</sup>

What he recorded about Denton appeared dry, routine. Norton listed Denton as the "Head" of the household and the renter of the house. He wrote that she was aged 25 and single. Both Thelma and her parents were born in Texas, although the specific locations were not recorded. Thelma spoke English, as did all other members of the household, and all could read and write. Interestingly, Norton recorded on his census form in the space for "occupation" a single word, "None." In fact, for *none* of the women living in Thelma Denton's neighborhood did Norton list any occupation. What Norton may or may not have known was that Denton's business was her house, a "house of ill fame" to use one of the many euphemisms of the early twentieth century. Norton may or may not also have known that Denton lived in Houston's legally designated vice district. The local slang term for the red light district was the "Reservation."

Regardless of Norton's awareness of the area, his census record of the Houston Reservation provides a rare glimpse into the human composition of that municipal vice district. It also allows an analysis, however tentative, of the female prostitute population within the Houston Reservation in 1910, and a basis for comparison with contemporaneous prostitute populations in other United States cities. Finally, an analysis of the census record helps in understanding the public policies that Houston adopted to control and to regulate the district, its inhabitants, and their male patrons.

Prostitutes had worked in the Bayou City since its founding in 1836. As a traditional transshipping point on the Old Spanish Trail and an important railhead, Houston had a long history of transient workers employed in the

<sup>2</sup>United States Constitution, article one, section two. United States Census, Thirteenth Census, 1910, Harris County, Texas, April 21-23, 1910.

<sup>3</sup>United States Census, Thirteenth Census, 1910, Harris County, Texas, Enumeration District 70, 4th Ward, sheet 3, E. G. Norton enumerator, April 23, 1910.

city's trade and commerce.<sup>4</sup> These men, who usually lived on the fringes and margins of respectable society, formed one of the primary clientele for prostitutes. By tradition and custom, Houston's disorderly houses and taverns congregated just off the main downtown area adjacent to Buffalo Bayou and the central market area. Until the early twentieth century, those rough downtown blocks held beer halls, pool halls, and women employees of such places. Their neighborhood acquired the nickname "The Hollow."

Tolerance of the vice district diminished in Houston, however, in response to national trends during the so-called Progressive Era. The purity campaigns of the Progressives encouraged local reformers to organize against vice in their locality.<sup>5</sup> In January 1908, a grand jury in Harris County indicted the owners of property in the Hollow for using their property for immoral purposes. Texas had revised its disorderly house statute in 1907 making it easier for citizens of a locality to begin legal actions against disorderly houses, and a group of Houston citizens had complained to the local district attorney late that year about the Hollow and the behavior of its occupants. As a result, the state secured indictments against the property owners forcing them to close the Hollow altogether or move. A few weeks later, Judge Norman J. Kittrell of the sixty-first state district court began finding the owners of Hollow property in contempt of court for ignoring the order to change their location or close their immoral businesses. But Judge Kittrell stayed his contempt orders for one month to allow the businesses a last chance to comply.<sup>6</sup>

Some of the disorderly houses closed and some did not. But, ironically, the effort to clean up the Hollow led to more problems. Houses that closed moved out of the commercial central city and into a residential, blue-collar neighbor-

<sup>4</sup>David G. McComb's *Houston: The Bayou City*, rev. ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981) is the best monograph on Houston's history, although it leans a little too heavily on anecdote and not enough on analysis.

<sup>5</sup>For example, see David J. Pivar, *Purity Crusade: Sexual Morality and Social Control, 1868-1900* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973). On the "white slave" hysteria of the period, see Ernest A. Bell, *Fighting the Traffic in Young Girls, Or, War on the White Slave Trade* (Chicago: G. S. Ball, 1910); Oliver Edwards Janney, *The White Slave Trade in America* (New York: American Vigilance Committee, 1911); Clifford G. Roe, *Panders and Their White Slaves* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1910); Clifford G. Roe, *The Prodigal Daughter: The White Slave Evil and the Remedy* (Chicago: L. W. Walter Co., 1911). For assessment of this scare, see Edward J. Bristow, *Prostitution & Prejudice: The Jewish Fight Against White Slavery, 1870-1939* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982); Frederick K. Grittner, *White Slavery: Myth, Ideology, and American Law* (New York: Garland, 1990); Mary deYoung, "Help, I'm Being Held Captive! The White Slave Fairy Tale of the Progressive Era," *Journal of American Culture* 6 (1983): 96-99. For less sensational assessments of vice in the period, see "Municipalities and Vice," *Municipal Affairs* 4 (1900): 698; "Another View of Municipalities and Vice," *Municipal Affairs* 5 (1901): 376.

<sup>6</sup>For a detailed chronology of these events and developments in Houston's history and in Texas law, see Thomas C. Mackey, *Red Lights Out: A Legal History of Prostitution, Disorderly Houses, and Vice Districts, 1870-1917* (New York: Garland, 1987), 290-340.

hood east of downtown where they caused even more problems. Neighbors complained. Children walking to school had to pass some of the newly opened taverns and bawdy houses. Passersby could see the activities inside the houses through open windows and doors. Strangers awakened the neighborhood in the middle of the night as they roamed about, knocking on doors, looking for recently moved beer halls and women.<sup>7</sup>

Responding to these complaints, the Ordinance Committee of the Houston City Council began to draft an ordinance to end the scattering of disorderly houses in Houston. On March 30, 1908, the city council, using its authority under delegated state police power, adopted "An Ordinance Colonizing and Segregating Houses of Ill Fame, and Assignment Houses; Regulating the Same and Prescribing Penalties."<sup>8</sup> It established a municipal vice district on Buffalo Bayou, west from the town center, in an undeveloped area of the city and county. City council carefully defined the boundaries of the district with the bayou as the northern boundary and Crosby Street the southern. The council also specified a variety of other offenses in the ordinance and barred "lewd women" from any coffee house, saloon, or bar-room other than those in the district. Further, the ordinance set a maximum fine for offenders of two hundred dollars. Although newspapers speculated that Houston might establish two vice districts, one for white women and one for African American women, the March 1908 ordinance established only one municipal vice district.<sup>9</sup>

Houston set no legal precedent in establishing its vice district; it conformed to a United States Supreme Court decision of 1899 that upheld such local public policies as valid uses of delegated state police power. In that decision, *George L'Hote v. New Orleans*, Associate Justice David J. Brewer upheld New Orleans's famous "Storyville" ordinance.<sup>10</sup> At the time (and perhaps even today) New Orleans's Storyville was the nation's most famous urban vice area. After the New Orleans City Council established the limits of Storyville by municipal ordinance in 1897, property owners just outside Storyville's limits brought suit against the city. They alleged that their property values would be depreciated and that the city's policy deprived them of their property without due process of law as guaranteed under the Fourteenth Amendment of the

<sup>7</sup>For neighborhood problems see *Houston Post*, February 27-29, 1908.

<sup>8</sup>*Charter of the City of Houston and General Ordinances, 1910* (Houston: Coyle and Co., 1910), 124-127.

<sup>9</sup>Houston revised the district's boundaries in 1911, but only slightly. See E. P. Phelps, comp., *Charter and Revised Code of Ordinances of the City of Houston of 1914* (Houston: n.p., 1914), 154.

<sup>10</sup>Rose, 185-203. For Justice Brewer's decision, see *George L'Hote v. City of New Orleans*, 177 U.S. 587 (1899). At the Louisiana State Supreme Court level, see *George L'Hote v. City of New Orleans*, 51 La. Ann. 93, 24 So. 608 (1898).

Constitution. The court unanimously disagreed. In the decision, Justice Brewer wrote that cities and localities best know their local problems and, if states had granted to cities the power to district their vice activity, then any "pecuniary injury" to third parties was not sufficient to overturn the local public policy.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the Storyville ordinance passed constitutional examination.

With this judicial precedent in mind and probably with a copy of the Storyville ordinance in hand, the Houston City Council enacted its ordinance for "Houses of Ill Fame." In its meeting on March 30, 1908, the council confronted two problems: first, the presence of prostitution in the city and the question of the best method to control and to regulate that trade, and, second, the location of the proposed district.<sup>12</sup> This second question boiled down to deciding in whose backyard the city could locate such a district without creating a political problem. Commissioners James A. Thompson, J. Z. Gaston, James Appleby, and James B. Mirian stated that urban areas always had an immoral female population, drawing a parallel to the Biblical dictum that the poor would always be present. Not surprisingly, given the era, the commissioners said nothing about the patrons of such women; after all, to that generation the women in the sex trades, not the men who patronized them, formed the problem. Having decided to create a district, the commissioners located it to the west, up the bayou, in an area of the city bordering on a black section of town. Blacks were a disenfranchised group the commissioners did not fear at the polls. Also, since the proposed area was undeveloped, establishing the vice district there would expand and develop Houston. In other words, the establishment of a vice district by the city council meant urban development of an unused area of the city.

The commissioners' arguments bore fruit. By 1909, houses had been built in the designated vice district and the area had acquired its nickname, the Reservation. In fact, the area had become so well established that it attracted the attention of local Justice of the Peace Michael McDonald, who took it upon himself to Jim Crow the bawdy houses in the Reservation.<sup>13</sup> Early in June 1909, McDonald warned African American and white women who lived in the same

<sup>11</sup>*George L'Hote v. City of New Orleans*, 589.

<sup>12</sup>For the Ordinance Committee report recommending districting, see City Council Minutes, Houston, Texas, March 30, 1908, Book P, 290-294, Texas and Local History Department, Houston Public Library.

<sup>13</sup>The major events and litigations began in late June 1909. See the *Houston Post* and the *Houston Chronicle*, both for June 26, 1909. New Orleans eventually established a second vice district exclusively for black women. See Rose, chapter 1. C. Vann Woodward mentions the separation of the New Orleans vice district as one of the extremes to which Southerners could take Jim Crow. C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 3rd rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 102.

houses in the Reservation to separate. They did not reassemble into separate, race-specific houses, so on June 24, 1909, McDonald and his constables arrested 26 black women on the charge of vagrancy.

Thelma Denton and the other 25 arrested women resisted the Justice of the Peace's separation order from their first arrest and trial through the Texas appellate system to the Texas Supreme Court, which finally ruled against them in 1911.<sup>14</sup> They lost every hearing, trial, and appeal in their bid not to be separated from their white colleagues in the Reservation's bawdy houses. The 1910 census suggests that segregation had largely occurred, that only a few white women lived in houses headed by black women and almost no black women lived in houses headed by white women. What is, perhaps, surprising, is that Denton and the other arrested women resisted at all. Houston was a Southern city and official racial segregation was the rule for public places and public conveniences. Unfortunately, the evidence does not answer the question of why Denton and the other women thought they could successfully resist the racial separation of the bawdy houses in the Reservation and why and how they fought separation as long and as far as they did.

Little can be known with certainty about Denton and her associates, or about the other women in the Reservation, since no papers, diaries, or other remembrances of and from the Reservation have survived. Attempts at oral histories have proven unsuccessful, since most people (then and now) simply will not speak about such intimate matters. But a careful analysis of the bare-bones information gathered by census enumerator E. G. Norton on April 21-23, 1910, yields some insights as well as additional questions.

Norton recorded a total of 238 women living within the limits of the Reservation as prescribed by the city council. Of these, Norton listed 182 as "white," 33 as "black," and 23 as "mulatto."<sup>15</sup> Expressed in percentages,

<sup>14</sup>See Mackey, chapter 6, for a detailed account of these events. Thelma Denton and her lawyers appealed her conviction for contempt of court as the way to resist the separation of the races in the Reservation. She lost at the Court of Civil Appeals level, *Michael McDonald v. Thelma Denton, et. al.*, 63 Tex. Civ. A. 421, 132 S.W. 823 (1910), and she lost at the Texas Supreme Court level, *Thelma Denton et. al. v. Michael McDonald*, 104 Tex. 206, 135 S.W. 1148 (1911).

<sup>15</sup>United States Census, Thirteenth Census, 1910, Harris County, Texas, April 21-23, 1910, sheets 1-3. A problem with terms exists. "Mulatto" was not recognized as a separate category under Texas law. What Norton meant by the term "mulatto" is unclear. Some women whose place of birth is listed as "Mexican/Spanish" are listed as "mulatto" as are some women who are listed with American places of birth. How Norton came to the conclusion that someone was a "mulatto" is simply a mystery. Therefore, I have retained this category of women as a division within the prostitute population of Houston.

In 1910, the census found Houston to be a city of 78,800 people. That figure would make the prostitute population in the Reservation 0.003% of the total population of the city. A larger prostitute population may have existed in Houston, but this paper is concerned only with those women who appeared within the boundaries of the district on the 13th U.S. Census.

76.47% of the Reservation's women were white, 13.86% black, and 9.66% mulatto. However, a problem with the source arises at even this simple level. Denton's name is on the suit opposing the justice of the peace's order to Jim Crow the Houston vice district, a suit brought by African American women. Denton's name also appears in the *Houston City Directory* with the designation "c" for "colored." But in the census, Norton listed Denton and all the boarders in her house as "white." Two of Denton's boarders were also defendants opposing the racial separation of the bawdy houses.<sup>16</sup>

Were Denton and the two boarders white? The local newspapers reported that all the women arrested by McDonald for failing to separate were black.<sup>17</sup> And, given the racial assumptions and racial consciousness of that era, it seems unlikely that white prostitutes aided and supported black prostitutes in resisting Jim Crow. Finally, it is difficult if not impossible to imagine why a white woman of that time would be listed year after year as "colored" in the public *City Directory*. There might be many incentives, however, for a black woman to attempt to be officially counted as white—"passing," in the slang phrase. One explanation for the discrepancy is that Thelma Denton and others lied about their race to Norton. A second possibility is that Norton marked down race according to how he perceived the women he talked to, without actually asking them. Texas law defined people as black if they had one-sixty-fourth part black ancestry, a definition that included many people who seemed white by appearance.

This lack of conclusive evidence about Denton's race suggests that the racial breakdown of the total number of women in the census and the degree of racial mixing in their houses is suspect. It also emphasizes that "hard" evidence such as the census record can prove to be very soft evidence indeed. Most of the women cannot be located in the *Houston City Directory* of 1910-11. Of those whose names appeared, eight more in addition to Thelma Denton are listed as "colored" in the directory but as white in the census. Nevertheless, the census record can be of use in an attempt to determine general trends and patterns in the social composition of the Reservation.

According to the census records for the 238 women in the Reservation, 77.31% (184 women) boarded while 22.68% (54) were heads of households.

<sup>16</sup>The *Houston City Directory* for 1909 lists Denton living at 830 Arthur and beside her name was the notation "c" for colored.

All numbers from the census are the real numbers. All percentages have been rounded off to two percentage points; therefore, percentage totals should add up to 99.99%.

When I consulted computer science professors and historians who use statistical analysis in their everyday work (I do not), they all agreed that the 238 women listed in the district simply were not a sufficient sampling number to submit to a computer analysis such as SPSS.

<sup>17</sup>*Houston Post* and *Houston Chronicle*, June 26, 1909.

This division into heads of household and boarders can be further divided by race. Of the 23 mulatto women in the district, 8 were listed as heads of the house while 15 were recorded as boarders, making 65.21% of mulatto women boarders and 34.78% heads. Of African American women, 24 boarded (72.72%) and 9 (27.27%) were heads of households. The majority of the white women boarded, 145 or 79.67%, while 37 or 20.32% headed households. On a percentage basis within these racial divisions, mulatto women were more likely to be heads of households (34.78%) and to hold the accompanying social and personal power within bawdy houses (and maybe the neighborhood) than either the black women heads (27.27%) or the white women heads (20.32%).<sup>18</sup> If expressed in terms of the racial breakdown of only heads of households, then 68.51% were white with 16.16% black and 14.81% mulatto. Ironically, then, although mulatto women were fewer, they were proportionately more likely to be heads of households than their black or white colleagues. Previous research has suggested that being the head of a bawdy house translated into power within the population of prostitutes. So, despite their small numbers, within their racial category mulatto women who headed households may have held a more prominent social position in the Reservation than their white or black head of household counterparts.

Norton's census book also contains information on the ages of the women in the Houston Reservation.<sup>19</sup> The average age of all women in the vice district was 24.55 years old. As might be expected, women listed as heads of household were older on average than all women and those listed as boarders were younger on average. The average age of the heads of households was 29.35 years whereas the average age for boarders was 23.14. Divided by race, the youngest white woman was 11 years old and the oldest white woman was 48. The youngest mulatto woman listed on the census was 15 years old and the oldest 38. For black women, the range of ages went from a high of 47 to a low of 14. Average ages within racial groups varied little, with the average age of black women being high at 25.21, white women averaging 24.82, and

<sup>18</sup>For the literature on the workings of and training within bawdy houses, see Diana Gray, "Turning Out: A Study of Teenage Prostitutes," *Urban Life and Culture* 1 (January 1973): 401-425; Barbara Sherman Heyl, *The Madam as Entrepreneur: Career Management in House Prostitution* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1979); Barbara Sherman Heyl, "The Madam as Teacher: The Training of House Prostitutes," *Social Problems* 24 (June 1977): 545-555; Paula Petrik, "Capitalists with Rooms: Prostitution in Helena, Montana, 1865-1900," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 31 (Spring 1981): 28-41.

<sup>19</sup>A large literature exists trying to assess who the women in prostitution were. For a sampling of that literature, see Joel Best, "Careers in Brothel Prostitution: St. Paul, 1865-1883," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 12 (Spring 1982): 597-619; James H. Bryan, "Apprenticeships in Prostitution," *Social Problems* 12 (Winter 1965): 287-297; James H. Bryan, "Occupational Ideologies and Individual Attitudes of Call Girls," *Social Problems* 13 (Spring 1966): 441-450.

mulatto women 24.3.

Eleven-year-old Florence Evengaritt was the youngest woman listed by Norton as a boarder. She was not living with relatives in the house; all the other persons in the house (one head and eight other boarders) were white women with no occupation, and the residence was clearly within the limits of the Reservation. Although young, she too may have been a practicing prostitute. Nearby, at 805 Lyons, Norton encountered Maud Lauret who, at age 19, was the youngest head of a house in the district. Four women boarded in her house: 17-year-old Jessie Lewis, 18-year-old Lou Bower, 19-year-old Vera Holland, and 23-year-old Gertrude Morris. Norton listed both Bower and Lewis as "w," for widows, Lauret and Holland as "s," for single, and Morris as "d," for divorced. Lauret's house was unusual, since most of the women in the district were listed by Norton as single, but the ages of the women were typical. Norton also recorded two 14-year-old and three 15-year-old women as boarders. Only one 16-year-old, Bessie Moore, can be found in the census as boarding in the district. Moore was listed as a widowed white woman with one child.

At the other end of the age spectrum were those older women residents of the Reservation who, presumably, were also pursuing the trade of prostitution. Norton recorded two women who were 48 years old. Both boarded in the district; they were not heads of households. Anna B. Mitchell was listed as single while Flora Hill was a widow. At 609 Raymond resided the oldest head of a household, Addie Moore, a 47-year-old black widow. Her house may have doubled, in fact, as both a bawdy house and a legitimate rooming house. Residing there was her nephew, John Simpson, aged 10, and a married African American couple, Minnie and William Tolan. Tolan worked as a laborer for one of the railroads in Houston and the couple had been married one year. Yet two other persons lived in the house, unrelated to either Moore or to the Tolans. Both of these women, Essie Anderson (a single black woman aged 30) and Rose Shanklin (a single black woman aged 15) were listed as having no occupation. They fit the profile of the other "working women" in the vice district. As the head of a household with rooms to let, Moore may have rented to whomever could pay the rent, whether it was an apparently respectable family such as the Tolans or working prostitutes.

The two largest houses in numbers of boarders were next door to each other. Sadie Coman (a single white woman aged 40) ran the house at 1104 Howard Street where she oversaw 12 boarders. Next door, Lulu Rhodes (a single white woman aged 33) ran the second largest house in the district with 11 boarders. Among the smallest houses, several included only a head and two boarders. For example, Katy Koch (a single white woman aged 27) was the head at 841 Arthur with two other women: Margaret Rehr (a divorced white

woman aged 23 with one child) and Hazel Parker (a single white woman aged 15).

The census also provides the place of birth of women in the district. Of the 184 boarders in the district, 72 (39.13%) were born in Texas, 91 (49.45%) were born elsewhere in the United States, and 21 (11.41%) were foreign born. Of the 54 women listed on the census as heads of households, 20 (37.03%) were born in Texas, 24 (44.44%) were born elsewhere in the United States, and 10 (18.51%) were foreign born. Overall, of the 238 women in the district, 207 (86.97%) were native born and 31 (13.02%) were foreign born. Of the 207 native-born women, 92 were born in Texas while 115 were not. These figures might seem surprising until one remembers that Houston was a rail, travel, and commercial hub. Perhaps the predominance of non-Texas-born women in the district can be understood as a result of a transient population of women following the railroad lines and other lines of commerce to transshipment points such as Houston. In all, 23 states are represented as the place of birth of all the women in the district. Of the non-Texas-born women in the vice district, Missouri contributed the largest number, 21. Other states with large numbers of women in the district were Louisiana (18), Illinois (10), Tennessee (8), Ohio (7), and Alabama and Georgia (both with 6 each). Among heads of households, Louisiana contributed six women and Missouri contributed three. The 31 women listed as foreign born represented eight countries. Twelve of the 31 foreign-born women listed "Mexican/Spanish" as their place of birth with eight others listed as "Russia/Pol." The other countries present among the foreign born were France, "Cuba/Spain," "Austria/Ger," "Hungary/Ger," and England. Unsurprisingly, many of the foreign-born women tended to cluster together in houses. American-born women with Hispanic surnames were less likely to cluster and were scattered through both the white and the Mexican-born houses.

The census reveals certain trends in the racial composition within the bawdy houses. Of the 37 households headed by white women, 35 households listed *only* white boarders. Only one household headed by a white had a black boarder, and only one headed by a white had a mulatto boarder. Interracial bawdy houses headed by white women were so rare that the listing of nonwhite women in white-headed houses might have been a clerical error or due to misperception by Norton.<sup>20</sup> This (almost) lily-white population in white

<sup>20</sup>On the census, Norton recorded Jennie Thomas's house at 850 Arthur as headed by a white woman and including two white boarders and one mulatto boarder. However, the *Houston City Directory* entries for 1910-11 list both Jennie Thomas and one of her supposedly white boarders, Anna B. Mitchell, as "colored." The other "white" boarder is not listed in the 1910-11 directory. Like Thelma Denton's house, Jennie Thomas's house may well have been all-black.

houses should not be surprising in view of McDonald's effort to separate the houses the previous year. The census report suggests that the justice of the peace had indeed achieved his goal of Jim Crowing the Reservation bawdy houses.

The bawdy houses headed by black and mulatto women show a different pattern. Of the nine bawdy houses headed by black women, five had only black boarders, three houses had only white boarders, and one had only mulatto women. Of the eight mulatto-headed houses, three contained all white women, one house contained all mulatto women, and within the other four houses lived a mix of white, black, and mulatto women. These interracial bawdy houses might seem to prove the failure of Justice of the Peace McDonald's attempt to Jim Crow the Reservation. But the overwhelmingly white boarders of the white-headed bawdy houses may be a better indicator of the extent of the racial separation. What went on within black- and mulatto-headed households may not have concerned McDonald, his constables, and the rest of Houston.

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to know anything about the patrons of the Houston vice district. But having overwhelmingly white houses for white male customers may have been McDonald's goal; therefore, what black and mulatto heads of bawdy houses did was less important to the white male legal and social order. Since, after 1909, white men could probably patronize any bawdy house in the district and since black and mulatto men could probably patronize *only* black and mulatto houses, then the true goal of Jim Crowing the Reservation was probably to keep the white bawdy houses free of black and mulatto women in order to limit the number of conflicts between *men* of different races. If McDonald's goal was to limit interracial trouble and conflict in the Reservation by keeping white and black *men* apart, then that goal could be achieved by separating the white and black *women* practicing prostitution in the Reservation. If it was, McDonald's policy of introducing Jim Crow to the vice district can be understood. And McDonald's policy of Jim Crow bawdy houses within the vice district was well underway, if not finished, by April 1910. Whether the separation of the races in Houston's bawdy houses actually limited conflicts between men patronizing the district cannot be known from the census and, unfortunately, no police records from this period have survived. But if McDonald's goal was to keep white and black males apart as they visited the district, then the racial separation of the women of the district helps to explain the policy of Jim Crow bawdy houses in Houston's Reservation.

A comparison of women of the Houston Reservation with other prostitute populations in the United States casts some light on the composition of the Reservation and shows that its population was much like those of other vice

districts.<sup>21</sup> Although no other research has been produced from the census records covering vice districts, other investigators have surveyed a variety of prostitute populations. The best-known nineteenth-century investigator of American prostitution was William A. Sanger, who published his study of world and New York City prostitution in 1859, *A History of Prostitution: Its Extent, Causes and Effects Throughout the World*.<sup>22</sup> As the resident physician of Blackwell's Island, a pauper hospital in New York City, Sanger surveyed two thousand prostitutes as they passed through his institution. He asked them 37 questions. Although no one would claim that Sanger's method of polling meets current standards of social science research, his book can be revealing if used carefully.

Sanger subscribed to the nineteenth-century interpretation of prostitution as a predetermined path from first moral failing to certain death, all in four years. His poll of the prostitutes aimed to "prove" this morality tale. But he did ask some useful questions: for example, the women's ages. He received a range of answers from 15 to 77 years old. Sanger's poll revealed a prostitute population that averaged about 19 or 20 years of age. This figure places the average age about four years younger than the census placed Houston's prostitute population, 24.55 years old. Both sets of data (1859 New York City and 1910 Houston) demonstrated a grouping of women between the ages of 18 and 26, but in New York the women were, on the whole, younger than in Houston.

<sup>21</sup>A large and growing history of prostitution and sexuality exists and only a few of the most important articles and monographs can be mentioned here. For an overview of sexuality in America with particular interest in homosexuality, see John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988). For important work on the history of prostitution, see Eric Anderson, "Prostitution and Social Justice: Chicago, 1910-1915," *Social Service Review* 48 (June 1974): 203-228; Anne M. Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitution in the American West, 1865-90* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Mark Thomas Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution in the Progressive Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Marion S. Goldman, *Gold Diggers & Silver Miners: Prostitution and Social Life on the Comstock Lode* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981); Barbara Meil Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: Knopf, 1986); Willoughby Cyrus Waterman, *Prostitution and Its Repression in New York City, 1900-1931* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932); Howard B. Woolston, *Prostitution in the United States prior to the Entrance of the United States into the World War* (Montclair, N.J.: Patterson Smith, 1969 reprint, originally published 1921).

Important work from a British context includes Paul McHugh, *Prostitution and Victorian Social Reform* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980); and Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

<sup>22</sup>William S. Sanger, *The History of Prostitution: Its Extent, Causes, and Effects Throughout the World* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1859).

In another prostitution survey, for the 1911 Chicago Vice Commission report, a similar statistical pattern can be seen.<sup>23</sup> After reviewing the data gathered from "thirty inmates of houses of prostitution in Chicago" (again, not a census report), the Commission claimed that women entered the "life" when they were 18 years old and, when interviewed by the Commission, those women (including heads) averaged 23.5 years old. This figure puts the average age closer to, but still younger than, the Houston average.

Another study of prostitution just slightly later than the 1910 Houston census report and, again, from New York City, identified a slightly different population group. George J. Kneeland's *Commercialized Prostitution in New York City*, published in 1913, presents two sets of evidence about the city's prostitution.<sup>24</sup> From a study of 269 prostitutes committed to the New York State reformatory at Bedford Hills, Kneeland found that the average age of women entering prostitution was "18 yrs. 9.18 mos."<sup>25</sup> Another table of data, gathered by an unidentified woman on Kneeland's staff, shows that the average age of 1,106 prostitutes interviewed from the "street" was "25.62+ yrs." Although this data is not as clear as one would like, Kneeland's investigation suggests an older prostitute population than Houston's for approximately the same period.<sup>26</sup> The data is admittedly not conclusive; but this collateral evidence suggests that Houston's population of prostitutes doing business in the Reservation did not significantly vary from other urban prostitute populations in the country.

Unfortunately, none of the original records of these non-Houston investigations appear to have survived. Sanger's records burned in a fire on Blackwell's Island in February 1858. Records of the Vice Commission of Chicago have not been located. Kneeland's funding for his survey of New York City prostitution came from the Bureau of Social Hygiene, and the Bureau routinely purged its files; as a result, none of the working papers of Kneeland's efforts can now be analyzed. Therefore, the federal census record of the 1910 Houston Reservation becomes an important original source to understand early-twentieth-century prostitution.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Vice Commission of the City of Chicago, *The Social Evil in Chicago* (Chicago: Vice Commission of Chicago, Inc., 1911).

<sup>24</sup>George J. Kneeland, *Commercialized Prostitution in New York City* (New York: Century Company, 1913).

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>27</sup>Other researchers have written about vice districts, but most of the literature chronicles the rise and decline of a municipal vice district and it does not (for lack of evidence) provide much analysis of the women in vice districts. See John S. McCormick, "Red Lights in Zion: Salt Lake City's Stockade, 1908-11," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 50 (Spring 1982): 168-181; James R. McGovern,

And what that record shows is a prostitute population slightly older than expected and divided by race, although the majority of prostitutes in the 1910 Reservation were not racial minorities but white women. The census reveals a female population group engaged in a heavily stigmatized trade, one dominated by young white women. This fact prompts the theory that Justice of the Peace McDonald's policy of separating the races was not motivated by a desire to protect the working white prostitutes in the district either because they were white or because they were women. Rather, it suggests that McDonald acted to protect the public peace and order in the Reservation by limiting the potential for conflict between the men patronizing the district. In order to achieve that goal, McDonald enjoined Jim Crow rules on the Houston Reservation. Not only did McDonald maintain white supremacy over the black population living in or near and patronizing the district, but he also maintained the dominance of white men over all other social groups in this Southern city's vice district.

Norton's census report provides an important, albeit inconclusive and perhaps flawed, evidentiary basis for an analysis of the prostitute population of Houston and the public policy decisions the city and the local justice of the peace made regarding that population. Norton conducted his census and collected his pay. It is up to historians to examine, to interpret, and to understand how and why the past public policies that affected Thelma Denton and her associates in the Houston Reservation were made.

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