

Brothels of Antebellum New Orleans

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Following wherever research leads is a tenet of scholarship for researchers. It's a standard operating procedure that helps scholars avoid tainting their research with preconceptions and assumptions. For historian Judith Kelleher Schafer, however, following her research also led to an unexpected venture into the wild and wicked world of prostitution in pre-Civil War New Orleans.



Judith Kelleher Schafer, a visiting professor in the Tulane history department, was doing research on slavery prior to the Civil War when she came across records about prostitution, leading to her newest book. (Photos by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Schafer, a visiting professor in the history department at Tulane University, says she "just fell on" the topic that is central to her most recent book, *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women: Illegal Sex in Antebellum New Orleans*, while conducting research for an earlier project.

While poring over court records and newspaper clippings for her 2003 book, *Becoming Free, Remaining Free: Manumission and Enslavement in New Orleans*,

1846-1862, she says she became aware of "all this information on prostitution from the same period."

Following her research into the bawdy and sometimes brutal world of prostitution in antebellum New Orleans often would lead Schafer to something unexpected. "I was surprised that brothels in New Orleans in the 1850s often had free women of color, as well as white women and slaves," says Schafer. "And free blacks and slaves could buy the services of white women."

White women comprised the vast majority of prostitutes, says Schafer, and nearly all of them were Irish immigrants between the ages of 18 and 22.

"It was the potato famine," says Schafer. "The Irish were pouring into New Orleans and the women did not have the skills or education ? and this was one way to make a living."



Court records and newspaper clippings led Schafer to write *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women: Illegal Sex in Antebellum New Orleans*.

Many of these women were "tough cookies," says Schafer. One prostitute, Bridget Fury, aka Delia Swift, had escaped from an Ohio penitentiary, where she had been incarcerated for manslaughter. "The governor of Ohio never tried to extradite her," says Schafer, "so she stayed in New Orleans. She and this woman Bricktop Jackson, both redheads, formed one of the first female street gangs in the United States."

The records show that Swift was arrested for stabbing a number of men during her career and finally was convicted of killing one of them. "She was supposed to go to the penitentiary," says Schafer, "but was so popular among politicians that they got her pardoned after a year or two."

And so it went. "The city was just wild and wide open," says Schafer, who read every issue of the daily paper, the *Picayune*, published during a 16-year period. "It's amazing what you learn about the city. The number of arrests every night were incredible. The police were hopelessly underpaid and understaffed and were almost nonexistent in terms of stopping crime."

Along with *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women* and *Becoming Free, Remaining Free*, Schafer has authored *Slavery, Civil Law, and the Supreme Court of Louisiana* (1994), for which she won the Francis Butler Simkins Prize of the Southern Historical Association and the Louisiana Historical Association's L. Kemper Williams Prize.

She says she's received more media attention for *Brothels* than for her other two books combined.

"As my husband told me, 'Sex sells, honey.'"