

An Analysis of Sex Work Over Time

The earliest studies of sex work, in the late 1800s, often took the form of what we now know as ethnographies, detailed interviews with people who, in this case, engaged in sex work. The ethnographies mostly entertained questions of morality, aiming to discourage current participants and deter potential newcomers to this industry.

Today, both scholarly and casual studies about sex workers often steer away from discussions of morality and focus more on aspects such as agency, exploitation, and the collision of sex workers with their cultural background (their geographical location, as well as their socioeconomic class, race, and religion). Many now believe that this fixation with morality takes away from the vocational and economic aspects of the job. Simply put, the moral aspect associated with sex work has kept people from recognizing the potential of this important and deeply human topic of study.

It is with this background that we can begin to understand how Madam Bessie Jones' grandmother and mother opened and operated the brothel that came to be known as "Bessie's House" in Carlisle, PA. This business, run by three generations of Black women immediately received attention and outrage from the community. Indeed, many attitudes from the town were like those of the first researchers: curious and ultimately disproving. However, these attitudes were not unanimous; the house remained open for well over 50 years. In fact, in the same court of law that Jones was tried in for running a "house of ill repute," her lawyer stated that he could point out numerous men who were recorded to have frequented Bessie's House. Sex workers, then, were considered to be immoral while the same judgment did not reflect on their customers.

This double standard affected the way that Jones lived and died. Her legal troubles, including time in prison, as well as the mysterious circumstances of her murder, were influenced by the way that people viewed her in the town, as a female brothel owner. Moreover, her identity as a Black woman influenced the way that she and her community (as well as greater Carlisle) interacted with each other. Jones is an example of a local historical figure and legend, who, if her story is examined more closely, can teach us about the sentiments and prejudices that prevailed in early Carlisle, as well as the ones that continue to the present.

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