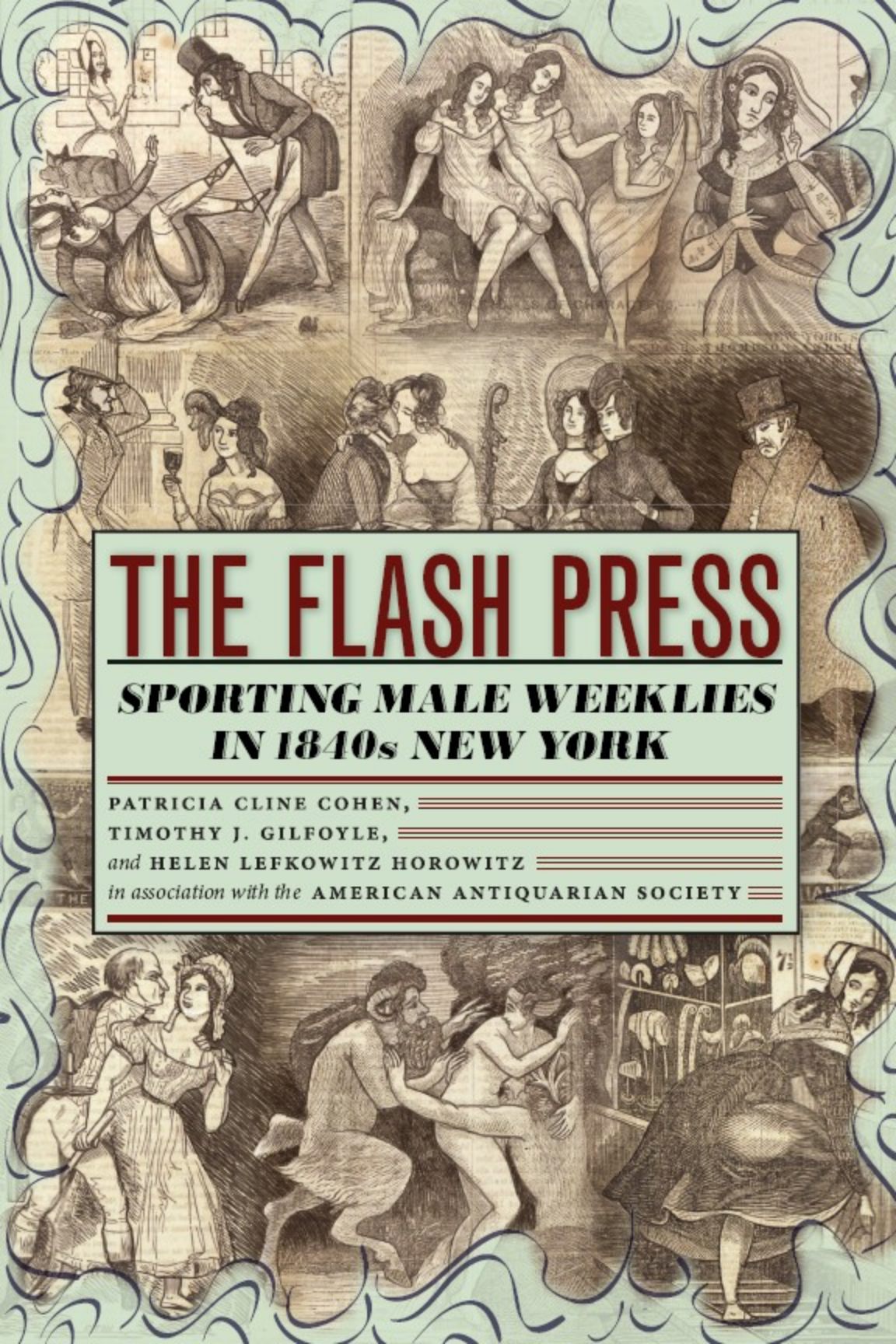

THE FLASH PRESS

SPORTING MALE WEEKLIES IN 1840s NEW YORK

PATRICIA CLINE COHEN,
TIMOTHY J. GILFOYLE,
and HELEN LEFKOWITZ HOROWITZ
in association with the AMERICAN ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY

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To

BENJAMIN J. COHEN

MARY ROSE ALEXANDER,
DANIELLE GILFOYLE, *and* MARIA GILFOYLE

and

to the newest members of the Horowitz family,
JUDITH LIEBMAN *and* BRADLEY REICHEK

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INTRODUCTION

From the fall of 1841 to the spring of 1843, an extensive sexual underworld of New York City came to sudden public notice through an eruption of small weekly newspapers with bold titles. The *Flash,* the *Whip,* the *Rake,* and the *Libertine* aimed to entertain and enlighten literate sporting men about leisure-time activities and erotic entertainments available in New York. Distinguished by a trenchant, mocking humor and a titillating brew of gossip about prostitutes, theatrical denizens, and sports contests, the papers offered guidance to men young and old intent on navigating the new world of unrestricted pleasure and commercialized leisure in the city. They frequently defended such behaviors in the vernacular of republicanism and democracy.

Customers could easily acquire the papers in saloons and oyster bars, on steamboats and in barbershops. Young newsboys pitched them to likely looking readers on the streets, outside hotels, and at the public promenade at Battery Park at the southern end of Manhattan. Papers graced parlor tables in the elegant brothels of the city's Fifth Ward and circulated in the third-tier balconies of the Park and Bowery Theatres, where prostitutes regularly congregated for evening amusement and to arrange business deals. Handbills advertising coming issues were posted openly and notoriously. The flurry of scandalizing papers reached a peak in the summer of 1842, at a time when all four titles squawked in competition; their presence proved difficult to ignore.

New York was no stranger to the cacophony of competing newspapers. In the 1830s and 1840s the city of more than 300,000 inhabitants supported somewhere between forty and fifty daily and weekly publications. Some featured commercial news, others political; some sheets took a religious or reform slant, while others were primarily literary or cultural. The major dailies had recently faced and absorbed a challenge from what were called the "penny papers," a cheap alternative press combining limited hard news, human-interest features, and more than a dollop of crime and sensationalism, along with a highly personalized editorial voice, all contrived to augment newspaper readership with the more plebian

and street-smart crowd.[1] There were specialty weeklies devoted to labor or to sports and theater, along with a remarkable number of short-lived papers combining humor, gossip, crime stories, and social notes on elite balls. The reading public of New York City certainly had abundant choices, reflecting both a reading revolution and dramatic innovations in the technology, economics, and production of newspapers that started in the 1830s.[2]

But until the "flash" papers came along, no newspapers dared to trumpet the attractions of prostitutes, provide tour guides to the city's brothels, and give voice to an otherwise hidden community in the city. Reportage of theater, sports, balls, and politics in these papers took on "flash" attributes as well, emphasizing racy details and colorful characters, pitched to a "man-about-town" readership. The editors brandished satirical humor, often striking a pose of great shock—bogus shock, to be sure—at the scandalous activities they described for their appreciative readers.

The term "flash press" was just one of several descriptors applied to these short-lived papers. Producers and admirers used such adjectives as racy, satirical, spicy, or sporting to describe them, while their outraged adversaries called them obscene, libidinous, loathsome, lascivious, and disgusting. We have settled on *flash* for its in-the-moment, slangy connotations, and also because the genre-setting first paper was titled the *Sunday Flash.* First coined among the swindling underworld of eighteenth-century London, *flash* denoted an elaborate slang vocabulary used by thieves to communicate among themselves and mystify outsiders. It carried core meanings of smartness and deceit. A New York glossary of "flash terms" from 1847 defined *flash* as "the language of thieves," while an 1859 slang dictionary also from New York defined a *flash-man* as "a fellow that has no visible means of living, yet goes dressed in fine clothes, exhibiting a profusion of jewelry about his person," suggesting an income derived from pimping or thieving. A British slang dictionary of 1874 defined it as:

> *Flash,* showy, smart, knowing; a word with various meanings. A person is said to be dressed FLASH when his garb is showy, and after a fashion, but without taste. A person is said to be FLASH when he apes the appearance or manners of his betters, or when he is trying to be superior to his friends and relations. FLASH also means "fast," roguish, and sometimes infers counterfeit or deceptive—and this, perhaps, is its general signification.[3]

The New York flash papers actually did not have much obscure slang in them, but they described a world of deceit and counterfeit, where

FIGURE 1. *SUNDAY FLASH,* OCT. 24, 1841. COURTESY AMERICAN ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY. THE FLASH PRESS THRIVED FROM 1841 TO 1843.

attractively innocent young women turn out to be sexually available, where respectable men young and old lead double lives and fear exposure, where swindlers and cheats abound among the lowlife and the elite—where things, in short, are seldom what they seem. This quality of "flash," of deceit and ambiguity, applied equally well to the editors themselves, who trumpeted their lofty mission as one of exposing vice and iniquity even as they fawned over particular brothels and prostitutes and engaged in blackmail. They attempted to walk a fine line, projecting moral outrage and winking humor simultaneously; certainly their dedicated and enthusiastic readers understood their main mode to be satirical.

As bold, noisy, and provocative as these papers were, in their time, for many years they were completely forgotten. Historians of journalism and even sensational journalism had no knowledge of them. A near-exhaustive book-length bibliography of New York antebellum newspapers published in 1928 by Louis H. Fox merely noted the titles *Rake, Whip,* and *Flash* with no extant copies.[4] Twentieth-century lawyers and judges arguing obscenity cases did not know to use them as legal precedents, and historians studying the history of sex, gender, and sports were ignorant of them.

Not until 1985 did a significant collection of nearly a hundred issues land in the world of scholarship, in a single purchase made by the American Antiquarian Society (AAS) in Worcester, Massachusetts, from a private party living in New Hampshire. The Antiquarian Society, the premier library in the United States for antebellum printed materials, was well suited for this acquisition. It already owned a small set of antebellum racy papers from the 1840s and 1850s, two of which were flash papers of early 1840s New York: the *Libertine* (June 15, 1842) and the *Weekly Rake* (July 9, 1842), the latter given to the AAS in 1946 by New York scholar and noted bibliophile Thomas O. Mabbott.[5]

FIGURE 2. *WEEKLY RAKE,* JULY 9, 1842. COURTESY AMERICAN ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY.

Patricia Cline Cohen appears to have been the first historian to see the 1985 set, during a fellowship year she spent at the Society in 1987–88. She was assiduously tracking New York City newspapers for her research on the murder of a prostitute in 1836, using Fox's bibliography to ferret out unusual titles. On one memorable day, Dennis R. Laurie, reference specialist of newspapers and periodicals, asked her if she might like to see some uncatalogued New York titles of a somewhat disreputable character. (Their uncatalogued state should not be interpreted as reticence or suppression; in the pre-computer era, the AAS perpetually faced a large backlog of uncatalogued materials.) Laurie brought out the papers in successive batches; Cohen recalls that they were not yet filed in the large acid-free folders regularly used for old newsprint but seemed to be wrapped in a loose, gauzy paper.

About two years later Cohen met Timothy J. Gilfoyle and tipped him off to the flash papers. His book, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790–1920,* published in 1992, was the first to cite them in print. Cohen also made brief use of them in a 1992 article. Musicologist Dale Cockrell was the third to cite them, in articles in 1996 and then in his 1997 book, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World,* which featured two figures from the flash press

FIGURE 3. *WHIP AND SATIRIST OF NEW-YORK AND BROOKLYN,* FEB. 12, 1842. COURTESY AMERICAN ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY.

world who also had notable careers performing or managing minstrel acts. Cohen drew on the flash papers to expand on the customs of elegant brothels in New York's Fifth Ward for her 1998 book, *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York.* Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, our third coauthor, learned of the Antiquarian Society's collection on her first visit to the AAS when research librarian Joanne D. Chaison showed her a sheet of "racy" primary sources at the AAS that included the papers' titles. A fellowship year allowed her to research them extensively for her 2002 study *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America.*[6]

The idea for our collaboration was sparked in 1999, when Cohen, Gilfoyle, and Horowitz teamed up in a session at the American Studies Association meeting in Montreal, in a session titled "Three Takes on the New York Flash Press." By this time, Horowitz had discovered that a private collector, Professor Leo Hershkowitz of Queens College, held another ten issues originally gathered in evidence files by New York City's district attorney in the 1840s. After visiting Professor Hershkowitz's home, Horowitz returned with Cohen to examine these papers thoroughly. She then helped persuade him to donate his materials to the AAS in 2001.[7]

It is remarkable that so many of these disreputable flash papers have survived. The combined set of 104 issues constitutes 73 percent of the implied full set of the weeklies, calculated to be 142 issues. The district attorney's office had reason to preserve the ten issues, at least in the short run, as material evidence in potential libel and obscenity trials; these issues are marked by the district attorney's hand, with paragraphs highlighted and notes in the margins. Indeed, existing indictment files at the New York Municipal Archives for the cases that went to trial still contain a few single issues of the papers. But who initially preserved the large and privately held collection? One strong candidate is an editor or writer for the *Whip.* That newspaper's run is complete for its first six months and nearly complete for the rest. Moreover, the *Whip*'s editor was previously a reporter for the *Sunday Flash,* so he had motive and opportunity to save many of those issues. But this collection also included many issues of the rival papers the *Flash* and the *Weekly Rake*; we can conclude that the collector was clearly intent on saving the entire production. How and where the collection survived for its first sixty or eighty years remains unknown, but it seems probable that it continued to be held within the sphere of sports journalism, the later career of at least two of the flash press editors. Sometime between about 1910 and the 1930s, a well-known

New York sportswriter, George B. Underwood, acquired the collection. Underwood was an athlete himself, with a gold medal in track from the 1904 Olympics, and a man with a passion for boxing. Over the years he wrote a sports column for various New York newspapers—the *World,* the *Evening Telegram,* the *Press,* and the *Sun*—and in the 1920s he was also a regular writer for the *Ring,* a boxing magazine. For a time he managed publicity for Madison Square Garden, the New York sports arena. A descendant recalls that he was a popular figure with famous boxers, socializing with them at his home. He very likely shared train trips with athletes and sportswriters to cover sporting events, and camaraderie in saloons as well. At some point in this cozy community of men's men, the flash papers surfaced, and George B. Underwood came to be the steward of the set, whether by gift or by purchase. A trajectory through sports journalism channels to Underwood is far more likely than a transit via the other main readership of the papers, prostitutes and madams, with their shorter careers and their minimal involvement in publishing. A chain of sports journalists with a high appreciation for unique specimens of print culture offers the most plausible explanation of the collection's survival. Underwood died in 1943, and in 1985 his son sold them to the Antiquarian Society.[8]

The contemporary readers of the papers, men (and women) who bought them in theaters, saloons, and barbershops, had little reason to save their copies and perhaps much reason to dispose of them quickly. What hooked buyers—gossip about sex accompanied by names and initials of real people—would be exactly why they would be quickly discarded. These are not the kind of papers typically saved for posterity, especially if one's own identity were exposed to public view and ridicule.

What can we learn of the contemporary readers of the flash press? New York City and other urban centers in the 1830s were rapidly expanding in numbers of single white men and women aged 15 to 30. Some among the young men were native New Yorkers, from artisan and working-class families of the city's lower wards, well described by one scholar as an urban "bachelor subculture" of unattached men expressing male camaraderie around sporting events and saloon-hall drinking. But probably as many flash press readers were newcomers drawn to the city by the promise of entry-level jobs in a rapidly commercializing economy. By the thousands they left homes in the rural countryside of New England and the mid-Atlantic states, skilled in the reading, writing, and arithmetic essential for white-collar jobs as sales clerks, bookkeepers, and secretar-

ies. Crowded together in largely unsupervised boarding houses in lower Manhattan, they took their meals in oyster bars and cheap saloons. Moralistic guidance literature aimed at such youths warned them to steer clear of the temptations of urban vice; the flash press offered contrary guidance, steering them straight to the locales and institutions of the sexual and sporting underworld.[9]

Some flash press readers were to be found among the young women who arrived in New York daily, seeking work as domestic servants or seamstresses. Some of these working women joined New York's rapidly growing ranks of prostitutes, said to number between five and ten thousand around 1840, at a time when the city's population was 312,000. The flash newspapers elevated a handful of these women to celebrity status and bantered about others in editorial columns. And one paper featured a regular column titled "Fair Sex" that covered balls and fashions for its female readership.[10]

Still, male readers predominated. Male clients far outnumbered prostitutes, and literate young men flocking to white-collar work far outnumbered literate girls of the servant/seamstress/sex-worker stratum. Factor in the newly arrived greenhorns, inexperienced in the protocol of commercial sex but wanting to learn, along with readers interested in vicarious thrills but not looking to cross a brothel threshold, and the reason for the strong male flavor of the flash press becomes clear. The real surprise is that there was any cultivation of female readership at all.

As that large number of prostitutes implies, commercial sex in antebellum New York City was not in short supply, and it seemed to many to be rapidly increasing. In response, a moral reform movement, led by evangelical ministers and mostly female congregants protesting sexual immorality, launched itself in 1833 in New York and spread to other cities. Soon the New York group began publishing its own bimonthly periodical, the *Advocate of Moral Reform,* filled with stern articles about a rising tide of "licentiousness," a judgmental and fear-mongering term that framed illicit sex as lascivious, lustful, and lewd. The moral reformers were criticized for their unladylike attention to sexual sin, but they were far from alone in their alarm. One striking way to demonstrate the moral panic over sex is to chart the printed usage of "licentious" and "licentiousness," as measured in computer-assisted searches in over a thousand periodical publications in the years 1800 to 1865. The dramatic peak of 1841–45 represents 3,179 repetitions of those two words and coincides perfectly with the years of the flash press.[11]

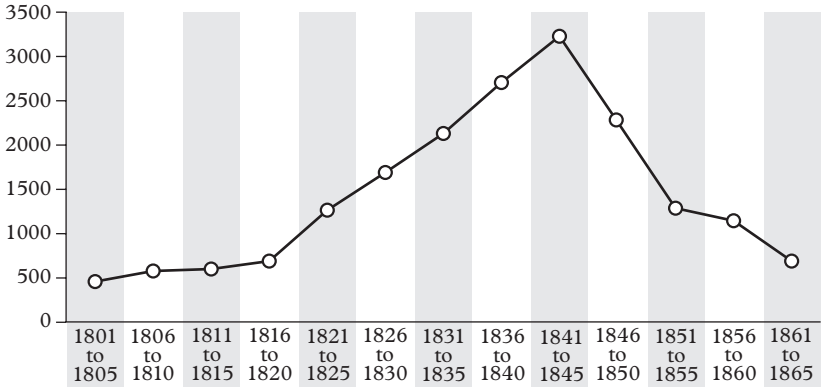

FIGURE 4: DATA ON THE FREQUENCY OF THE TERMS "LICENTIOUS" AND "LICENTIOUSNESS" IN FIVE-YEAR INTERVALS IN THE AMERICAN PERIODICAL SERIES ONLINE (APS), PROQUEST, ACCESSED AUG. 2, 2006. THE APS CONTAINS 900 SERIAL TITLES FROM 1800 TO 1860, AND ANOTHER 118 UP TO 1877, TOTALING MORE THAN SEVEN MILLION PAGES. NEITHER THE *ADVOCATE OF MORAL REFORM* NOR ANY OF THE FLASH PAPERS IS PART OF THE DATABASE. THE DATA REVEAL AN ESCALATION OF CONCERN ABOUT ILLICIT SEX AND A SATURATION OF THE WORD LICENTIOUSNESS PEAKING IN 1841–45, WITH OVER THREE THOUSAND REFERENCES TO THE TWO KEYWORDS. SOME PORTION OF THE UPSWING FROM 1800 TO 1840 REFLECTS THE INCREASED NUMBERS OF PRINTED PAGES OVER TIME, BUT THAT MAKES THE FALL-OFF AFTER THE EARLY 1840S PEAK ALL THE MORE REMARKABLE. ILLICIT SEX PROBABLY CONTINUED UNABATED INTO THE 1850S AND 1860S, BUT AFTER 1850 IT WAS EITHER DISCUSSED IN PRINT LESS OFTEN, OR THE TERMS OF THE DISCUSSION LITERALLY CHANGED. ACCORDING TO THE *OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY,* THE ORIGINAL MEANING OF "LICENTIOUSNESS" AS LICENSE FROM LEGAL RESTRAINT WAS SUPPLANTED BY THE SEXUAL MEANING, LEWDNESS, BY THE NINETEENTH CENTURY.

A surging concern over sexual licentiousness was at once both the precondition and consequence of the flash press. New York already had one periodical attending closely to sexual sin, published by the moral reform women, and it was not so great a leap to imagine the comic possibilities of satirizing it. In an era when the start-up costs of producing a weekly newspaper were surprisingly low, it probably did not take astute business sense to appreciate the potential sales of periodicals serving as trade journals for the high-end brothel business yet masquerading as moral-reform publications when they came under fire. And the large population involved in commercial sex meant the readership would be strong.

Prostitution was quite visible in the neighborhoods of the western lower wards of New York City, where high-priced brothels stood adjacent to the solid and spacious dwellings of the middle and upper classes, and in the densely crowded eastern wards, where down-on-their-luck girls sold sex in alleyways and dingy tenement rooms. Dressed in silks, streetwalkers openly cruised Broadway, the city's main north-south thoroughfare, and prostitutes had their exclusive seating section in all the city's theaters.

Prostitution and other forms of non-marital sex were not absent before the 1830s; New York had a version of the "pleasure culture" that a recent scholar has so well described in detail for Philadelphia in the years from 1760 to 1800.[12] That old, looser sexual regime treated moral lapses as regrettable rather than catastrophic; an out-of-wedlock pregnancy—not uncommon up to the 1790s—could be put right by marriage.

This tolerant attitude, however, was completely reshaped between 1800 and 1830 among members of the emerging middle classes. A newly emphasized ethic of sexual restraint took hold, ostensibly directed at both sexes. Women perhaps more readily than men adopted the strictures on sexual behavior and policed the boundaries of respectability of their sex, drawing clear lines between sexually pure versus unchaste women. What was particularly novel was the penalty attached to loss of female virginity: "fallen" women were ruined, in the language of the day, shunned by decent society, unfit for respectable married life, and doomed to swell the ranks of the "frail," i.e., prostitutes. Many men of the growing middle classes also honored the sharp distinction between pure and fallen women, but since it was male sexual privilege that created the category of unchaste women, it is clear that hypocrisy about moral standards for men flourished widely. A corresponding vocabulary described sexually experienced men—such epithets as "rake" and "libertine" were in everyday use—but a man so designated did not usually suffer exile from respectable society. As female moral reformers often complained, a man with a fast reputation for sexual experience was sometimes especially sought after for his allure and sophistication. In short, an especially acute double standard of sexual morality was in play.

The distinctive contribution of the flash press to this evolving sexual scene was to embrace words like "rake" and "libertine" and to build a sense of shared community around them. By publicizing the locales and participants engaged in non-marital sex, the papers familiarized and normalized those activities and thereby emboldened men to feel comfortable asserting male sexual prerogatives in opposition to the emerging canons of respectability. Male readers of these papers were no longer individual hypocrites, slinking guiltily through dark streets in search of illicit sex. They could recognize themselves as members of a subculture defined by shared values and activities, forging a male sociability through their nonconforming sexual behaviors that flaunted conventions. Readers also shared enthusiasms for sports, like pugilism, pedestrianism, and dog fighting, and for theatrical performances as well, with attentive coverage

of skimpily clad female dancers and minstrel shows, acts that pushed the boundaries on body exposure and disguise. The flash press played a vital part in constituting this community of men, giving it a language and an identity popularly called *flash.*

This flash community soon took on regional and even national dimensions, thanks to a system of agents who contracted to sell the papers in far-flung places. Letters and articles submitted by correspondents to the *Flash,* the *Whip,* and the *Rake* reveal that tendrils extended out from the city, to other larger cities and small villages all over the Northeast and mid-Atlantic states and even to the South, where one communication line stretched deep into Georgia. Rather well along on research for this project, we discovered that a number of flash-like newspapers also dotted the landscape from the late 1830s to the early 1850s, some precursors to the New York City set and others clearly copycat enterprises. In Philadelphia there was the *Spy and Philadelphia Paul Pry* (1842), in Baltimore the *Viper's Sting and Paul Pry* (1849–50), and in Boston the *Satirist* (1842–43) and the *Boston Blade* (1848). The New York set was centered in a cluster of risqué humor papers: the *Polyanthos* (1838–41), the *Two-Penny Trumpet* (1841), the *Uncle Sam* (1841), the *Arena* (1842), the *Sportsman* (1843), the *Packet* (1845), *Ned Buntline's Own* (1849), the *Scorpion* (1849), and the *Pick* (1852). In the 1850s, the *Broadway Belle* (1858) and *Venus's Miscellany* (1857–58) moved the genre into the category of erotic fiction, quite different from the flash papers.[13]

Such a rich array of sex and humor papers helped us to isolate distinctive features in our original set of flash papers. As with a medical nosology, we elaborated eleven diagnostic symptoms: (1) coverage of sporting events and theater; (2) malicious gossip tidbits submitted by readers; (3) stories condemning immoral men; (4) reports from regular correspondents detailing sexual scandals; (5) anticlerical themes; (6) coverage of criminal underworld activity, such as gambling, abortion, or confidence games; (7) critical coverage of prostitution and other illicit sexual behaviors; (8) rough populism or republicanism critical of hierarchy and privilege; (9) cartoon lithographs with sexual and ribald themes; (10) a defense of active, male heterosexuality; and (11) favorable coverage of prostitution and other illicit sexual behaviors. A range of publications in the antebellum era, both serious and humorous, contained from one to five of these features, while our core flash papers had nine to eleven. The distinctive character of flash came principally with the last two on our list.

The fully flash papers of New York established and maintained their preeminence among satirical papers not only by their content but by their razor-sharp wit and style. They originated from the country's center and heart of journalism, and their talented set of editors and writers managed to make local stories and characters speak to the entire country—or at least a certain stratum of like-minded readers around the country, proving that New York's reputation as a cultural capital able to set styles was as true of this low echelon as it was of the high culture of art and literature. These papers innovated recurring features, such as profiles of notables written with artful cunning and clever "wants" on the model of gossip want-ads, that enticed readers to buy every issue and follow the foibles of characters. The *Flash,* the *Whip,* the *Rake,* and the *Libertine* were brash and brazen, boldly embracing the brothel scene and touting allegiances (when not picking feuds) with the women there. At times, they invoked republican language that introduced a new form of political commentary. The less cosmopolitan papers of the 1840s do not score as high in flashiness. The editors, of a nature more timid or less ribald, took their sexual content where it naturally occurred in public view, as in trials of seduction and adultery suits, or from police reports of brothel raids. In general they were not as willing to engage their readers with boundary-breaking topics or to thumb their noses at authorities.

At this writing, a small but growing number of other scholars have drawn on the flash press for a range of projects including popular dancing, sports, interracial entertainments, homosexuality, pornography, obscenity, women's underwear, and New York nightlife and nocturnal activities.[14] The American Antiquarian Society has now microfilmed the entire rich trove of satirical materials, including a number of the flash-like papers as well. We expect their greater accessibility will lend substantial aid to future studies of early American humor and satire, of adolescence and youth, of class and race mixing, of sports like pugilism and pedestrianism, as well as to further work on sexuality and gender.

The flash papers describe on their own terms and in their own flippant tone an underworld that formed a larger part of antebellum American culture than hitherto acknowledged, a world that drew in a surprising range of participants and offered a challenge to what has often been seen as a monolithic Victorian sexual regime emphasizing suppression if not outright denial of sexual urges. The papers illuminate an erotic universe with models of masculine and feminine behavior differing from those of the dominant culture. With humor and sarcasm, the editors challenged

FIGURE 5. "A STREET VIEW." WOMEN'S UNDERWEAR IN THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY FEATURED AN OPEN INSEAM BETWEEN THE LEGS, FOR EASE IN TOILETING FUNCTIONS. THE MAN BELOW THE GRATING HOPES TO CATCH A PRIVATE VIEW. *WEEKLY RAKE,* JULY 9, 1842. COURTESY AMERICAN ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY.

the ethos of sexual purity that constituted the official story about respectable sexual morality. Perhaps such subcultures have always existed, on the margins and behind closed doors. Too often historians have learned about such alternative universes from crime reports or from the moralistic critiques of reformers. Guided by denizens of the subculture, the flash papers take readers, both then and today, behind those closed doors.

But we also need to be cautious: our amusing flash men are not always reliable reporters. They were, after all, satirical writers competing with one another, settling scores against each other as well as poking fun at hypocrisy in the larger world. Ambiguity and deceit are the hallmarks of flash; and so we find that even while presenting prostitution in a positive light, the editors might bizarrely insist that their goal was to promote morality by exposing sexual sin, and they freely lobbed charges and countercharges of immorality at each other. Cracking their own code, their flash-take on an inverted world of easy male sexuality that co-existed (for many of them) with simultaneous participation in respectable society, is our aim in this book, and to that end we provide substantial excerpts from the papers and illustrations to allow readers the challenge and fun of interpreting the satirical, sarcastic evidence for themselves.

PART I
THE FLASH PRESS

1 BEGINNINGS

Rivalry and Satire

In July 1842, two editors of a distinguished New York literary weekly called the *New World* sounded the alarm about four "licentious publications" which are "thrust in our faces at all the landings, ferries, and other places of resort." Comparing the onslaught of printed immorality to the worst libertine period of the French Revolution, the men chose their words carefully, to communicate the transgression without being tainted by it themselves. "Pictorial representations, calculated to excite the imaginations and passions of the young, and to gratify the morbid and beastly appetites of the worthless debauchee, are issued by the thousands." Why, they asked, are the press apathetic and the police silent? The papers were hard to miss: "The city has been covered with placards for the last six months, giving minute particulars of the revolting contents of every new publication in staring capitals."[1]

An out-of-town daily newspaper, the *Philadelphia Journal,* expressed amazement that such papers existed:

> There are now published in New York at least three papers, the chief end of which is not to disseminate general intelligence, nor intelligence of any kind which is usually the sustenance of the periodical press. Their aim is neither religious, literary, nor political. They have nothing to do with science or art, nothing with trade or finance, nothing with the agricultural, mechanical, or liberal professions, nothing with benevolent institutions or associations. "What, then, is their purpose?" asks the innocent reader. It is to promote vice and crime—to point out the facilities for immoral practices which are afforded in large cities—to propagate slanders—to blast character—to debase intelligence—corrupt the heart—and fill the paths to perdition![2]

Another New York paper, a new community weekly called the *Gazette Extraordinary,* sternly called for legal action against the notorious publications "weekly thrust into the face and eyes of the mayor, the District Attorney, the Grand Jury, and of every officer in the city—[yet] nothing is done to suppress them. The city is disgraced at home and abroad; the

ribaldry and beastliness to which it gives utterance, through the medium of these obscene presses, calls forth the rebuke and the reproach of sister communities; and all because our police is too imbecile, or too cowardly, or too wanton, to do its duty and execute the laws." The *Gazette* demanded crackdowns on the editors and publishers, urging stronger laws if existing ones were inadequate, to get the "loathsome, horribly disgusting, and obscenely damnable publications" off the streets. "Let Mr. District Attorney Whiting look to it," or, the *Gazette* darkly hinted, an enraged mob would take up the job.[3]

The leading daily newspapers, on the other hand, gave little attention to the flash papers. Even the female-edited bimonthly periodical dedicated to rooting out licentiousness, the *Advocate of Moral Reform,* barely took note of the racy publications—which only shows that silence in no way implied approval or consent.[4] To write about the flash papers was tantamount to admission that one had seen them, handled them, perhaps even read them, and that was more than the moral reform women or the male editors of the mainstream daily papers were willing to do.

Clearly these innovative little weeklies touched a nerve. Thousands of New Yorkers loved their audacious charge and sent circulation soaring, while others became angry or fearful, nerve-wracked, perhaps, about the immorality the papers endorsed. District attorney James R. Whiting was not known as a particular friend to moral reform, but at several points from 1841 to 1843 he brought legal action against the aggressively marketed weeklies.[5] Only when the flash editors were on the court docket did they finally rate coverage in the major New York dailies, confined to the police office or court of sessions columns.

Enjoying high circulation and mostly stony silence from the authorities, the spirited editors gave free rein to bawdy humor as well as spleen and pioneered a new genre of American publication, drawing on British prototypes skillfully adapted to American forms of ribald humor and sexual sensibilities. This chapter introduces the editors and sketches out the day-to-day workings of the flash press. Five remarkably talented men, intimately familiar with urban male sporting culture, were responsible for transgressing the limits on what could be published in the antebellum United States: William J. Snelling, George Washington Dixon, George Wilkes, George B. Wooldridge, and Thaddeus W. Meighan. A sixth editor, Thomas L. Nichols, also deserves notice for his consistent role in promoting other flash papers and perhaps for publishing one himself, sufficient copies of which have not survived to make a definitive call.

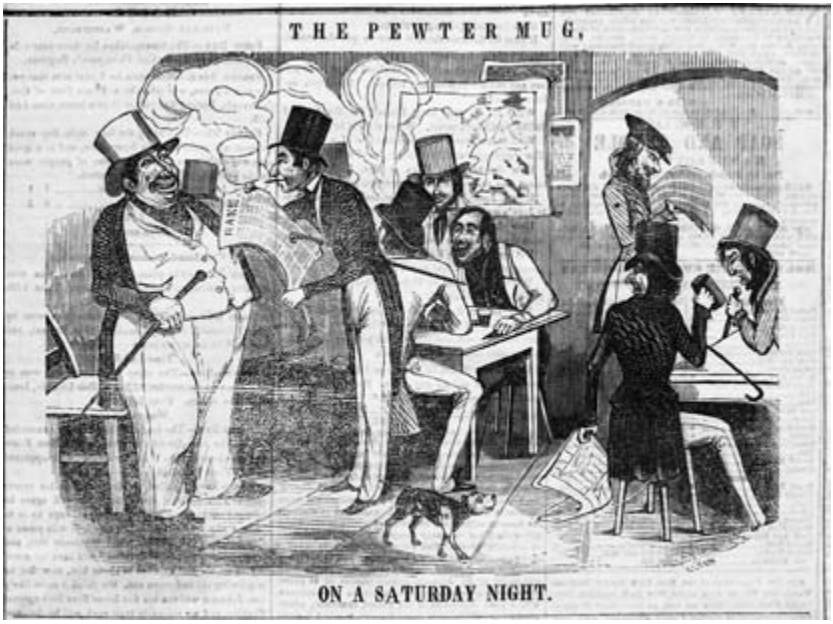

FIGURE 6. "THE PEWTER MUG, ON A SATURDAY NIGHT." NOTED LITHOGRAPHER JOHN H. MANNING SHOWS HIGH-HATTED MALE PATRONS OF A NOTABLE PUB ON FRANKFORT STREET, READING THE *RAKE* AMIDST CLOUDS OF SMOKE. *WEEKLY RAKE,* OCT. 22, 1842. COURTESY AMERICAN ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY.

Several more men also worked on the papers, in secondary or understudy roles: Charles G. Scott, John Vandewater, George Colburn, and Henry Renshaw.

Who were these men, and why did they get involved in what turned out to be a legally risky business? What did the papers print, and what was controversial about their contents? What was their distribution, and what clues do we have about the presumed and actual readership of the papers? How did the editors make money? What about blackmail? And finally, what can we learn about the urban sexual subculture to which they spoke, and indeed helped to create and enliven?

I The *Flash,* the *Whip,* the *Rake,* and the *Libertine* burst forth in quick succession. A timeline mapping their dates of issue suggests the synergy among them, a combination of rivalry and mimicry. Their heavy presence in summer 1842 indicates an enthusiastic readership.

The flash papers differed one from another in particulars, but they shared a pattern and style. They were salacious and sex-oriented, hu-

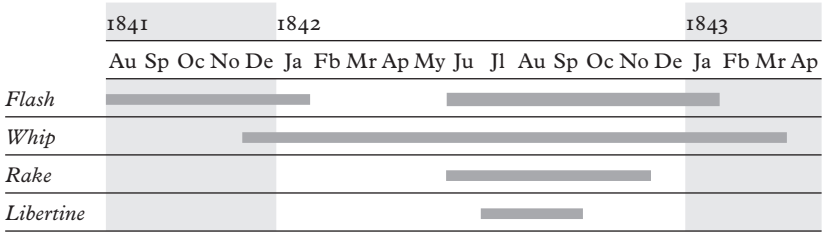

FIGURE 7. FLASH PRESS TIMELINES. SEE APPENDIX FOR FULL PUBLICATION DETAILS.

morous and ribald, in league with the brothel world and also in varying degrees attuned to the saloon culture and competitive athletic sporting life of young "bloods"—the fast young men—of the city.[6] Seeking to expose the hypocrisy in high places, their editorial voices were often infused with a distinctive republican or democratic rhetoric. They were issued as four-page sheets, then the common length of many daily and weekly papers (though near the end of its run, the *Sporting Whip* expanded to eight pages). The front page typically carried an engraving depicting a character profiled in an adjoining story or else a picture of stock figures in a humorously compromising situation. Page-one articles often lifted up either a specific local person or a generic character (the serving girl, the milliner) to highlight a quarry's foibles and sexual quirks. The *Flash* titled this feature the "Gallery of Rascalities and Notorieties" and focused on locally well-known men connected to newspapers, theaters, brothels, or crime, whose exploits and weaknesses—for sex, for drink—were scathingly ridiculed. These were never admiring profiles. Other profiles under the rubric "Lives of the Nymphs" or "Nymphs by Daylight" featured individual "frail" young women giving sympathetic and compelling stories of their descent into prostitution. ("Frail" was not a flash word but a common code word used by the dominant culture to describe a woman of compromised sexual virtue, whose fall thus indicated moral weakness on her part.) Some papers might run on page one a scandalous "crim. con." article ("criminal conversation" in English law, meaning a charge of adulterous sex), regaling readers with some sexual entanglement, purportedly of real people; other front pages featured short fictional pieces involving seduction or adultery.

The second page always carried an editorial column on the left, where the editors castigated their opponents, puffed their favorites, or commented on events of the week. Then came short items of news relating the comings and goings of prostitutes, fancy men, pimps, and dandies,