

THE SALOON IN NASHVILLE
AND THE COMING OF PROHIBITION
IN TENNESSEE

by

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I dedicate this to the forgotten patrons of Black Bottom and Hell's Half Acre saloons who faced miserable home environments and constant harassment by the Nashville Police.

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ABSTRACT

Saloons in Nashville and other American cities offered more than food and drinks to patrons: they served as centers of entertainment and places to seek companionship. Despite their importance, drinking establishments in Nashville and other parts of the urban south have been little studied. By the early twentieth century, Nashville saloons had reached two hundred in number and faced little regulation. Yet, in little over ten years, legal saloons were forced to close. Their downfall was rapid because the city's saloons became a main target of Tennessee evangelical organizations and progressive politicians like Edward Carmack. They made drinking establishments for the wealthy become equally detestable as ones in slums to the Tennessee voting community. Tennessee politicians responded by removing saloon backers from political office in Nashville. Cities were the last strongholds of saloons in the South. The saga of those businesses in Nashville was indicative of events across the region.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	vi
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION	2
CHAPTER II: THE NASHVILLE SALOON LANDSCAPE	9
CHAPTER III: SOL COHN AND THE LIFE OF THE NASHVILLE SALOON KEEPER	31
CHAPTER IV: SALOON POLITICS AND REFORM IN THE CAPITAL CITY	51
CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION	71
BIBLIOGRAPHY	73

LIST OF FIGURES

1.	Map of Nashville from the Automobile Blue Book, 1919	1
2.	Image of the Maxwell House interior, c. 1910	12
3.	Print of Fourth Avenue North, c. 1910	13
4.	Southern Turf Saloon ad from the <i>Nashville American</i> , 1905	15
5.	Images of the Southern Turf Saloon building, Climax Saloon building, and Utopia Hotel, 2013	15
6.	Image of the Silver Dollar Saloon	18
7.	Map of Downtown Nashville and surrounding neighborhoods, c. 1900	21
8.	Image of a Black Bottom tenement, 1909	23
9.	Image of an alley in Hell's Half Acre, c. 1950	27
10.	Image of the Gerst Brewery tap room	29
11.	Image of the Cooper Trial in the <i>Nashville American</i> , 1909	44
12.	Political ad in the <i>Nashville Tennessean</i> and the <i>Nashville American</i> , 1917	46
13.	Front page of the <i>Nashville Tennessean</i> after Senator Carmack's death, 1908	60
14.	Southern Turf Saloon ad in the <i>Nashville American</i> , 1909	63
15.	Image of Mayor Hilary Howse	65



Figure 1. Map of Nashville from the 1919 Automobile Blue Book. Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In his memoir, Nashville banker James E Caldwell recalled the city “had been overrun with every kind of tough element during the [Civil] war, male and female, and great numbers of them were still hanging on, and drinking, gambling and every known form of immorality was practiced — it certainly was a wide-open town.” Caldwell, an opponent of alcohol, said that Nashville’s drinking landscape gave the city the appearance of “a human sewer.” Its “stream came in fresh from the country, meandered through the immoral shoals and eddies, and disappeared in oblivion and early death.” What he saw was the impact of a sophisticated alcohol landscape that had developed in the city during the period.¹

Throughout early American history, drinking establishments have been important commercial spaces for meetings and social functions. Men sought drink, food, shelter, and companionship at them. After the Civil War, increased alcohol consumption in the South along with the influence of corporations allowed for the rise of a new type of drinking establishment known as the saloon. The word originated from the salon which meant large and elaborate social hall in French. When the first saloons opened in the United States, they were fancily decorated. However, the name was quickly adopted by most drinking establishments. Despite that fact, saloons were markedly better places to drink alcohol than past taverns. Unlike in previous generations, it was possible for consumers in saloons to purchase not only locally produced alcohol - but also regionally,

¹ James E Caldwell, *Recollections of a Life Time* (Nashville, TN: Baird-Ward Press, 1923), 71-72.

nationally, and internationally produced spirits. Furthermore, competition among saloons often led to their acquiring new and more comfortable furnishings.²

As cities grew in the later nineteenth century, increasing numbers of saloons opened up to serve citizens of all classes. For urbanites working outside of the home, they provided a desired amusement and served as a place for socialization. Northern cities such as Chicago and St. Louis had the highest number of saloons develop during the nineteenth century. Yet in Nashville and other Southern cities, the local culture and society created unique regional variations on the nineteenth-century saloon. These differences made them more susceptible to closure.³

To understand why prohibition was imposed relatively early upon Nashville saloons, one must consider how Nashville saloons and saloonkeepers differed from those in places like Chicago. In Middle Tennessee, patrons were predominantly African American or of British ancestry. By comparison, saloons of Northern cities existed for a much wider variety of ethnicities and social groups. In addition, one must also understand how the public perceived particular saloon areas. Tennessee's large evangelical population produced a powerful prohibition movement that developed early.

Saloons in Nashville were able to offer entertainment to men such as gambling and prostitution without restriction for much of the nineteenth century. Starting around the beginning of the twentieth century, the police, after significant public criticism, heavily enforced regulations upon saloons. Saloons in the lowest-class neighborhoods

² Madelon Powers, *Faces Along the Bar: Lore and Order in the Workingman's Saloon, 1870-1920* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 15.

³ Perry Duis, *The Saloon: Public Drinking in Chicago and Boston, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 5.

bore the brunt of most raids. However, efforts fueled by rural evangelicals and prohibition advocates like Edward Carmack helped eventually turn much of public opinion against all Nashville saloons. Still, saloons remained in operation because of organized resistance to prohibition led by Mayor Hilary Howse. It took the removal of the mayor for the city's saloons to be shut down.

Scholarship on saloons in Tennessee and the American Southeast has been very limited. Traditionally, the majority of saloon studies have focused on the Northeast, the Midwest, and the Western frontier. Among book-length scholarly studies of postbellum saloons, Roy Rozenweig's *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* examined the social and economic functions of saloons in Worcester, Massachusetts. Perry Duis completed a comparative analysis in the book *The Saloon: Public Drinking in Chicago and Boston, 1880-1920*. Thomas J. Noel traced the evolution of saloons in Denver "as that city evolved from frontier outpost to urban center" in *The City and the Saloon: Denver, 1858-1916*. Elliott West researched the role of barrooms in western towns in *The Saloon on the Rocky Mountain Mining Frontier*. In the past decade, several studies of western saloons have been released including *Tombstone's Treasure: Silver Mines and Golden Saloons* by Sherry Monahan, *Boomtown Saloons: Archaeology and History in Virginia City* by Kelly Dixon, and *Legendary Watering Holes: The Saloons that Made Texas Famous* edited by Richard Selcher.⁴

⁴ Madelon Powers, *Faces Along the Bar*, 238; Roy Rozenweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Perry Duis, *The Saloon: Public Drinking in Chicago and Boston, 1880-1920*; Thomas Noel, *The City and the Saloon: Denver, 1858-1916* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 1982); Elliot West, *The Saloon on*

The oldest scholarly study on saloons in the Southeast was the thesis completed by Todd Herring in 1991 on drinking in Mississippi. More recently, Lee Willis released *Southern Prohibition: Race, Reform, and Public Life in Middle Florida, 1821-1920*. Besides those books, several additional studies have spent considerable time discussing Southeastern saloons. The dissertation “The Struggle over Prohibition in Memphis, 1880-1930” written by Yao Foli Modey placed the city’s saloons in the context of the prohibition movement in the area. However its discussion of saloons was limited to using popular histories of Memphis rather than primary source material. Most studies of the Atlanta riots in 1906 have discussed that city’s saloons because they were considered to be targets of the rioters. The most recent of published works was David Godshalk’s *Veiled Visions: The 1906 Atlanta Race Riot and the Reshaping of American Race Relations*. In places such as Memphis and New Orleans, saloons have played a prominent role in popular histories about nightlife and the criminal underworld.⁵

Studies of the Southern prohibition movement are numerous. One of the most recent studies on the South was Larry Coker’s *Liquor in the Land of the Lost Cause*. Another study that focused on how Evangelicals dealt with drinking and other popular

the Rocky Mountain Mining Frontier (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1979); Sherry Monahan, *Tombstone’s Treasure: Silver Mines and Golden Saloons* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007); Kelly Dixon, *Boomtown Saloons: Archaeology and History in Virginia City* (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 2006); Richard Selcher, ed., *Legendary Watering Holes: The Saloons that Made Texas Famous* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2004).

⁵ Todd Herring, “Saloons and Drinking in Mississippi from the Colonial Era to Prohibition” (MA Thesis, Mississippi State University, 1991); Lee Willis, *Southern Prohibition : Race, Reform, and Public Life in Middle Florida, 1821-1920* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011); David Godshalk, *Veiled Visions: The 1906 Atlanta Race Riot and the Reshaping of American Race Relations* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009); For more on the Atlanta riot see Rebecca Burns, *Rage in the Gate City: The Story of the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2009); Gregory Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot: Race, Class, and Violence in a New South City* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004); Mark Bauerlein, *Negrophobia: A Race Riot in Atlanta, 1906* (San Francisco, CA: Encounter Books, 2002).

entertainments in Southern small towns was Ted Ownby's *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South, 1865-1920*. However, the only significant study of the movement in Tennessee during the past fifty years was Paul Isaac's *Prohibition and Politics: Turbulent Decades in Tennessee, 1885-1920*.⁶

Local historiography dealing with Nashville saloons is scarce. Histories of Nashville during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries include Don Doyle's *Nashville in the New South, 1880-1920*, and William Waller's two-part history of Nashville from 1890 to 1910. Unfortunately, both are often too focused on business history and the stories of the elites. More socially representative history can be found in the *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* article "The City and the Slums: Black Bottom in the Development of South Nashville." This was the first article to consider Nashville's African American neighborhoods in any detail. The history of Middle Tennessee alcohol production can be found in Peter Krass's *Blood and Whiskey, The Life and Times of Jack Daniel* and Kay Baker Gaston's *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* article "George Dickel Tennessee Sour Mash Whiskey: The Story Behind the Label." Each details its respective whiskey company's strategy for entering the Nashville saloon market.⁷

⁶ Joe Coker, *Liquor in the Land of the Lost Cause : Southern White Evangelicals and the Prohibition Movement* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2007); Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Paul Isaac, *Prohibition and Politics: Turbulent Decades in Tennessee, 1885-1920* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1965).

⁷ Don Doyle, *Nashville in the New South 1880-1930* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1985); William Waller, *Nashville in the 1890s* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1970); William Waller, *Nashville 1900 to 1910* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1972); James Summerville, "The City and the Slums: Black Bottom in the Development of South Nashville," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 40 (1981): 182-192; Peter Krass, *Blood and Whiskey, The Life and Times of Jack Daniel* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2004); Gaston, Kay Baker, "George Dickel Tennessee Sour Mash Whiskey: The Story Behind the Label," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 57 (1998): 150-67; For more on whiskey production, see also Ben Green, *Jack Daniel's Legacy* (Nashville, TN: Rich Printing

Alcohol had an important presence in Nashville that has been largely ignored by the few histories written of the city. Only the activities of the wealthiest saloons have been discussed in any depth. Chapter two seeks to change that by detailing the saloon landscape in Nashville. It notes where saloons were located, what activities transpired at them, and what kinds of alcohol were served.

Chapter three chronicles the life of Nashville saloon keeper Sol Cohn, manager of an establishment that catered to African Americans. Cohn's life showed that saloon keepers needed a special set of abilities. Competition required that saloon keepers have strong financial skills. High crime rates necessitated that saloon keepers be proficient with weapons. Changing regulations made it beneficial for saloon keepers to develop strong relations with police and political authorities in any way possible. Mastering these abilities allowed Cohn to develop one of Nashville's most successful working class saloons and later a bootlegging business.

Chapter four details the political conflict over shutting down saloons in Nashville and other Tennessee cities. The conflict really only began in the 1880s when Tennessee evangelical organizations embraced the idea of prohibition and actively campaigned for it. Central to the success of prohibition activists was the Four Mile Law which banned saloons in the vicinity of schools and churches. Through expansions in coverage, that law was able to clear saloons from most of Tennessee by the early twentieth century. Still, activists recognized that people across the state could easily obtain alcohol by visiting Nashville, Memphis, or Chattanooga. Running for Governor in 1908, former US senator

Company, 1967); Kay Baker Gaston, "Robertson County Distilleries, 1796-1909," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 43 (1984): 49-67.

Edward Carmack called for a statewide prohibition law so that urban saloons would not have a detrimental effect upon rural Tennessee. His loss in the campaign stalled the prohibition movement. However, months later, his death in a duel with a prohibition opponent provided the political capital to pass statewide prohibition. In Nashville, the election of Mayor Hilary Howse and the creation of a pro-saloon political machine ensured that alcohol laws would not be readily enforced. Six years later, the removal of Hilary Howse from office by the state government resulted in the closure of most legal saloons.

CHAPTER II: THE NASHVILLE SALOON LANDSCAPE

During just one day in 1893, sixty-nine Nashville people were arrested for being drunk and disorderly. Alcohol was highly prized in the city and this made saloons prominent destinations for workers and visitors. One Cumberland River timber rafter recalled that going to Nashville was a powerful draw when he organized crews. Most of the men were focused on getting drunk on whiskey when they arrived in the city. Often they ended up in jail.¹ Saloons in the downtown were the destination for the Georgia militia upon an 1897 trip to the city. They ended up in a downtown brawl involving pistol fire. Many local residents faced similar situations when they patronized saloons.²

Nashville's most prominent saloons were concentrated on a stretch of Cherry Street (now known as 4th Avenue) between Church and Union streets. One *Nashville Tennessean* reporter described the neighborhood as "one big never-closed German beer garden, laced with Irish humor, kosher cooking and a river boat style of camaraderie."³ Saloons in this area were often connected with hotels or restaurants. Four institutions were the best known in the block — the Maxwell House hotel, the Climax Saloon, the Utopia Hotel, and the Southern Turf. All four were located in an area referred to by modern historians as the Men's Quarter.

¹ "Drunks and Disorderlies," *Nashville Daily American*, December 26, 1893, 4. Proquest (Document ID 938936188); Louis Kyriakoudes, *The Social Origins of the Urban South: Race, Gender, and Migration in Nashville and Middle Tennessee, 1890-1930* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 97.

² "Fight on Cherry Street: Georgia Militia and Nashville Men Have a Serious Difficulty," *Nashville American*, June 26, 1897, 2. Proquest (Document ID 940566727).

³ George Barker, "Before the Shooting Started: The Era of Nickel Beer, Free Lunch," *Nashville Tennessean Magazine*, June 6, 1965; For the article that defined North Cherry Street as a men's quarter, see David Thomason, "The Men's Quarter of Downtown Nashville," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 41 (1982): 48-66.

The “masculine aggressiveness of numerous fights, confrontations, and contests, the self-indulgence of the barroom,” and easy profanity made the Men’s Quarter a place that respectable women did not visit. One Nashville woman recalled: “Few modest ladies of that day would think of venturing into this No Woman’s Land where a number of leading saloons and gambling houses were located, and men congregated in groups. Even when a woman pedestrian was in a great hurry and this would have made a shortcut to her destination, a detour must be made.”⁴ In one story recounted in William Waller’s book *Nashville in the 1890s*, a group of young lady visitors to Nashville was accidentally separated from their host and wandered onto Cherry Street. When they were discovered by their host, “she told them that they were disgraced – that no ‘lady’ would ever be seen on Cherry Street. They cried with mortification, and feared they would never outlive the humiliation.” The reputation of Cherry Street among “respectable” women may have not merely been due to the perceived vices of saloons. According to William Waller, “ladies of the demimonde,” from north of the capitol, “would dress themselves in all their finery, obtain an open carriage, with driver, and drive along Cherry Street in broad daylight.”⁵

It was not just saloons that defined Cherry Street between Church and Union. The neighborhood was an important area for “politicians, lawyers, and newspapermen, all of whom had their locations in or nearby.” Furthermore, the block contained men’s clothing

⁴ Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 39; Libbie Morrow, “Cherry Street Once was Taboo to Ladies,” Qtd in David Thomason, “The Men’s Quarter of Downtown Nashville,” 54.

⁵ William Waller, *Nashville in the 1890s*, 142.

stores, tobacco shops, drug stores, barber shops, loan offices, and a whole assortment of other businesses that catered to men.⁶

At the corner of Church and Cherry streets was the Maxwell House which severed as one of Nashville's most prestigious hotels. It "remained the unchallenged headquarters of the politicians, and was the scene of great activity during sessions of the General Assembly." Rooms had electric lighting, its restaurant had an experienced chef, and its bar carried the choicest brands of liquor. During horse races the Maxwell House and other Men's Quarter institutions were the scene of great activity. *Nashville Banner* writer Marmaduke Morton noted that:

It was during the races that the Maxwell House shone resplendent in gala attire. At night it was a busy hive of swarming horsemen, betting men, pool sellers and curiosity seekers. The purses encased in silk and satin, adorned with bright ribbons of every color of the rainbow, would be hung on wires from rail to rail across the rotunda. The voices of the men selling auction pools reverberated from the billiard room, amid the hum of human voices, the shuffling of feet on the marble floor, and the clinking of glasses from the saloon.

In another article, Morton noted that male guests "loafed in easy chairs and talked politics, and discussed other subjects, while the impact of billiard balls and the clinking of ice in cut glass tumblers, as the spotless bartender stood behind the speckled counter and poured amber mixtures from decanters, could be heard."⁷

⁶ David Thomason, "The Men's Quarter of Downtown Nashville," 49, 52.

⁷ William Waller, *Nashville in the 1890s* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1970), 144-145; Marmaduke Morton, "The Colorful Eighties in Nashville: Horse Racing and Sportsmen – Scenes During Race Meetings – Old Saloons and Livery Stables," September 28, 1930, http://oldnewstom.files.wordpress.com/2010/09/1930_9sep_28-morton_1880s-nashvbanner-text.pdf; Marmaduke Morton, "The Colorful Eighties in Nashville: South's Reawakening – Confederate Brigadiers in Saddle - The Old Maxwell House – Noted Orators," September 21, 1930, http://oldnewstom.files.wordpress.com/2010/09/1930_9sep_21-morton_1880s-nashvbanner-text.pdf.



Figure 2. This image of the Maxwell House interior was likely taken sometime in the 1910s. Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

At 210 Cherry Street, the Climax Saloon opened in 1887. Four sculpted angels above the door greeted visitors to the saloon. On the saloon's first floor and basement was a theater for can-can dancers and other forms of entertainment. According to a 1970s article in the *Nashville Tennessean Magazine*, "The second floor had a bar and pool tables, with the tables being used for gambling purposes." Customers interested in sports could visit the saloon and have baseball games detailed by telegraph. On the third floor were bedrooms for prostitutes. "The girls offering their services on the third floor would stand along the stairs, and the men would make their choices as they walked up the stairway." False walls separated the bedrooms with closets inside where prostitutes could hide in the event of a police raid.⁸ Saloons in the North were frequently owned by

⁸ Wayne Witt, "Climax ' is Gone...Memories Linger," *Nashville Tennessean Magazine*, July 8, 1973, 11; "Free Baseball," *Nashville Daily American*, July 25, 1893, 8. Proquest (Document ID

individual breweries and exclusively served their products. In the absence of numerous regional breweries, the Climax was acquired by the George A Dickel Company to sell their products. Advertisements billed the Climax as headquarters for that company's "Old Cascade Tennessee Whiskey." While multiple distilleries had retail outlets in Nashville, the Climax was the only documented saloon acquired by one.⁹



Figure 3. This is a print of 4th Avenue in the Men's Quarter area. The presence of the Hotel Bismarck sign dates the image to the early 1910s. Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

The Utopia Hotel opened in 1891 at 206 Cherry Street. The "six story building contained sixty rooms and was decorated in the best fashion of the day." It contained a

940724244). The Climax Saloon advertised in the newspaper that baseball plays would be telegraphed to the bar.

⁹ Kay Baker Gaston, "George Dickel Tennessee Sour Mash Whiskey: The Story Behind the Label," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 57 (1998): 161-162.

restaurant that served a popular lunch to businessmen in the city. Business increased to such an extent that the dining room was lengthened and waiting staff doubled in 1904. Reporting on the expansion, the *Nashville American* noted that “more and more are the business of the city falling into the habit, which prevails so extensively in the North, of eating their midday meal in the city.” The Utopia was known for annually having a Christmas dinner for hundreds of Nashville’s poor. Those who came were given a basket full of sundries to last several days. The hotel was known for high standards with its rooms, restaurant, and bar. W. R. Polston, the proprietor of the hotel, angrily refuted charges that his bar promoted drunkenness. “The Utopia Hotel has a barroom, as has all hotels, but the rule is strictly enforced that no drinks be served to intoxicated persons.”¹⁰

Opened in 1895 at 222 North Cherry Street, the Southern Turf was the last major saloon constructed on Cherry Street. It may have been the most opulent of them all. According to the *American Journal of Commerce*, the place was a “veritable palace of mirth and merriment. ... Mirrors, bronze statuary, rare old paintings by great masters, mahogany furnishings, tropical plants and marble halls all help to bewilder the stranger, while electric fans send forth delightful breezes.” Imported liquors and wines were available to patrons of the establishment.¹¹

¹⁰ David Thomason, “The Men’s Quarter of Downtown Nashville,” 48-49; ; “Improving Utopia: Dining Room of Well-Known Hostelry Being Enlarged to be Made 35 Feet Longer,” *Nashville American*, August 2, 1904, 2. Proquest (Document ID 952850742); “W. R. Polston, of ‘Bread Line,’ Dead,” *Nashville Tennessean and the Nashville American*, February 9, 1911, 5. Proquest (Document ID 904828159); “Utopia Hotel,” *Nashville American*, December 15, 1901, 8. Proquest (Document ID 936186282).

¹¹ William Waller, *Nashville in the 1890s*, 141.



Figure 4. Southern Turf Saloon ad from the *Nashville American* during December 1905. Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.



Figure 5. Side-by-side images of the Southern Turf Saloon building, Climax Saloon building, and Utopia Hotel taken by the author in 2013.

These four mentioned drinking establishments were not the only places for the wealthy and middle class to purchase alcohol but they were the best known in Nashville. Numerous saloons dotted nearby streets such as Church and Sumner where downtown workers could purchase a drink. For instance, college students held “most of their dances at the Duncan Hotel ... and used the bar there as their off-campus headquarters. Thanksgiving night, after the annual Vandy - Sewanee football game, college boys just about took over every bar.”¹²

The North Cherry Street area was the domain of the famous Jack Daniel when he visited the city. While his nephew Lem Motlow was involved in political lobbying, Jack would “make a day of it” promoting his whiskey. According to a history of the distillery that used Motlow family members as information sources, Daniel “would walk down the street, enter a saloon, and ‘set up the house to Jack Daniel whiskey.’” Pretty soon “a throng of men would be following him from place to place.”¹³

The Cherry Street saloons as well as others nearby offered the popular institution known as the “free lunch.” For the price of a drink, saloon patrons could fill a plate of food from a buffet. At the Southern Turf, a counter near the bar had ham, chicken, cheese, and pickles of all kinds for the taking. Other saloons had soup, bread, cheese, sausage, and other similar foods. As could be expected, plenty of people abused the system and filled themselves with food. However, most would only have a “bite here and there.” As a result, the system proved to be an economical way of luring people into the saloons. One

¹² George Barker, “Before the Shooting Started: The Era of Nickel Beer, Free Lunch,” *Nashville Tennessean Magazine*, June 6, 1965.

¹³ Ben Green, *Jack Daniel's Legacy* (Nashville, TN: Rich Printing Company, 1967), 102-103.

article from 1887 stated that a free lunch buffet only cost about three or four dollars a day to maintain.¹⁴

Even saloons without a free lunch option usually offered reasonably priced meals. Men in the city around the beginning of the twentieth century could secure “a bowl of soup, roast beef, barbecued pig, two or three vegetables and dessert for 10 or 15 cents.” If that was not enough for a saloon patron, often small restaurants resembling diners offered cheap meals in the vicinity of saloons. Their dining rooms had a long circular counter flanked by stools that surrounded a cooking apparatus, “which is invariably a gas range or a gasoline stove.” Chinaware on the counter was heavy to guard against the “contingency of a too hilarious customer” flinging a plate or cup “at the proprietor’s head.” The proprietors were usually Greek or Turkish. Hamburgers, enough of a novelty that the *Nashville American* had to explain what they were, were among the most popular meals at these restaurants. A hamburger with a cup of coffee cost a person 10 cents in 1899. Steak with bread, potatoes, and coffee could be had for 15 cents. For the same price, one could obtain ham and eggs. Fried chicken, pickled pigs feet, sardines, ice cream, and slices of pie were some other foods that customers could easily obtain at small restaurants and lunch stands.¹⁵

¹⁴ Interview with Judge Lytton Hickman, April 11, 16, 1951, in Waller Project Collection. Vanderbilt University Special Collections Library, Nashville; “Free Lunches: Spread by Nearly Every Nashville Saloon,” *Nashville Daily American*, November 12, 1887, 5. Proquest (Document ID 950640941).

¹⁵ “Pie is still the Favorite,” *Nashville American*, July 3, 1899, 5. Proquest (Document ID 957654277).

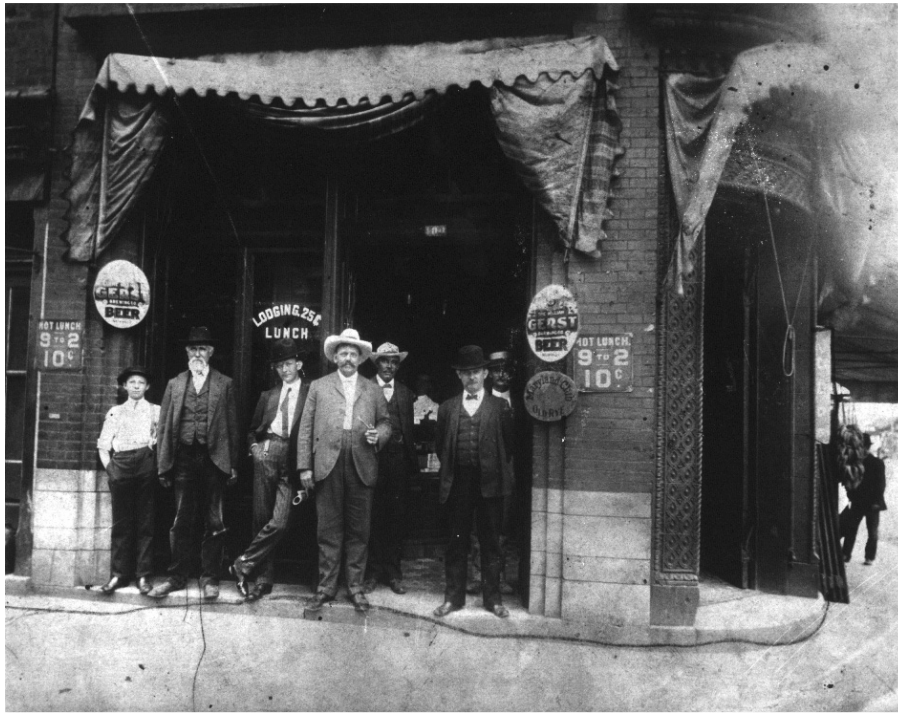


Figure 6: This image shows the Silver Dollar Saloon on Broadway and its price for lunch. Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

The space in front of saloons offered a place for food stands or carts to operate. In one story reported in the *Nashville American*, Frank Stroud started a hamburger stand that operated in the Black Bottom saloons because he had become physically handicapped. Financial success he found running the stand inspired others to set up similar places. However, one day, Patrolman Bob Meadows told him to move his stand in the front of Hartman's saloon because crowds were blocking the sidewalk. Stroud moved up the street only to find Patrolman Meadow's brother took his original location to open a stand.¹⁶

Saloons that catered to the working-class were found in neighborhoods considered the least desirable by the Nashville elite. These tended to be low areas subject to

¹⁶ "Fares Very Badly: Man Who Introduced Hamburger Stands an South Cherry Has Trouble," *Nashville American*, October 23, 1904, 22. Proquest (Document ID 936455728).

flooding, near industry, and with significant African-American populations. Often located in areas with other businesses associated with vice, they became known as red-light districts. These areas were defined by a slovenly appearance. Historian Don Doyle describes the red-light districts: “Garbage, ashes, and kitchen slop were piled in back alleys and yards or, too often thrown into the streets until they were picked up by an overworked scavenger hired by the city.” Collected refuse was dumped into the Cumberland River. Large quantities of manure, animal urine, privy fumes, and animals both dead and alive created an enormous stench on hot days. Disease was highly prevalent in these neighborhoods. African Americans in Nashville consistently died at a rate twice as high as the city’s white population.¹⁷

For African Americans and poor white residents in these neighborhoods, saloons took on an extreme significance as poor-man’s clubs. Spaces like saloons gave the working-class a place to socialize and discuss the most pressing issues of the day without the influence of the white elite. In one history of nearby Chattanooga, it was suggested that the black factory worker strike of 1906 was planned in the city’s saloons. As a result, the mayor of the city ordered African American patronized saloons to be shut down for several days. Nothing as dramatic happened in Nashville but the city’s African-Americans definitely had an influence upon local politics.¹⁸

While saloons in working-class neighborhoods lacked the elaborate theaters and other luxury features found downtown, they were often run in conjunction with other

¹⁷ Don Doyle, *Nashville in the New South 1880-1930* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 83-84.

¹⁸ Michelle Scott, *Blues Empress in Black Chattanooga: Bessie Smith and the Emerging Urban South* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 109-111.

businesses. One letter sent to the editor of *The Nashville American* claimed 95% of the saloons in the city's outlying districts were run with grocery stores out in front. Others often connected to barber shops. Gambling and dance halls were often found in the back rooms or in the upper floors of these facilities. Brothels may have been located on the premises or in nearby buildings. In the Civil War period, working-class saloons were most densely congregated in a red-light district known as Smoky Row. It was located north of Jo Johnston Avenue and between Third and Fourth avenues near the modern Bicentennial Mall. By later in the century, Smoky Row had been eclipsed by other areas. Because of their proximity and visibility to downtown Nashvillians in the period before Prohibition, the later developing working class districts of Hell's Half Acre and Black Bottom will be the focus of this study.¹⁹

¹⁹ H. C. P., "Protecting the Saloon-Keepers," *Nashville American*, November 26, 1906, 4. Proquest (Document ID 940548665).

Before saloons were forced downtown in 1907, notable concentrations of saloons could also be found in areas such as Crappy Shoot, Trimble Bottom, and North Nashville. Because of these areas lack of visibility to most visitors and their lack of influence after 1907, the author has chosen not to focus on these areas.

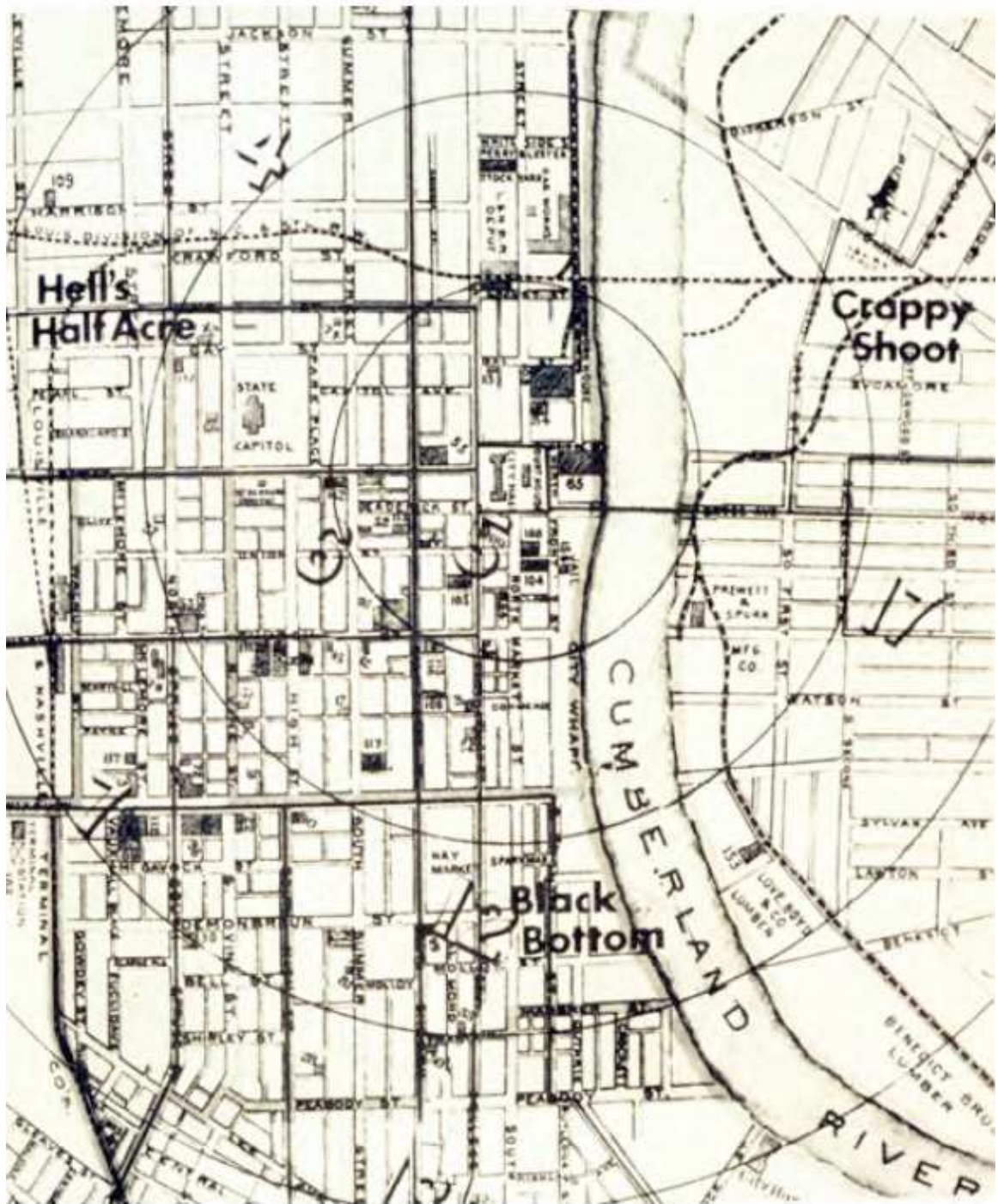


Figure 7. Map of Downtown Nashville and surrounding neighborhoods, c. 1900. Marshall and Bruce Co., 1900. Acquired from Don Doyle, *Nashville in the New South: 1880-1930*. Original Source: Tennessee State Library and Archives.

Judging from letters to the newspaper, no neighborhood of Nashville created stronger opinions than Black Bottom, a neighborhood “located in the low land south of Broad from the riverfront up to about Fifth Avenue.” One letter to the editor of the *Nashville American* stated, “if a conglomeration of dives, brothels, pawnshops, second-hand clothing stores, filthy habitations and the like – accompanied by the daily display of lewdness and drunkenness on the sidewalks and redolent with a stench of vile odor – can make a ‘hell-hole,’ then Black Bottom ... is that place.” Saloons in that area were most densely concentrated on South Cherry Street (Fourth Avenue after 1904). These businesses were run by a variety of groups including descendants of Jewish, German, and Irish immigrants as well as African Americans.²⁰

By the early twentieth century, few actually wanted to live in Black Bottom. Significant numbers of African Americans moved to further afield areas such as North Nashville to escape the neighborhood. Judging from crime reports, letters to the editor of Nashville newspapers did not necessarily exaggerate in their descriptions. In one story from 1881, it was reported that a Murfreesboro man abducted a 14-year-old girl and brought her to Black Bottom to sell her as a prostitute to either a saloon or private individual. Most disturbing about the incident was the fact that the man did not hide he was bringing the girl to Nashville for prostitution. This information was given to fellow train passengers on the way to the city.²¹

²⁰ “Black Bottom,” *Nashville American*, June 30, 1905, 4. Proquest (Document ID 927431478); Don Doyle, *Nashville in the New South 1880-1930*, 80.

²¹ “The Murfreesboro Abduction Case,” *Nashville Daily American*, March 15, 1881. 4. Proquest (Document ID 940508756).



Figure 8. Image of a Black Bottom tenement from a *Nashville American* article on the neighborhood in August 1909. Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

While Black Bottom saloons lacked the décor of “Men’s Quarter” institutions, they often had similar social club features. At one saloon run by Jo Watson, an African American, a cigar store was located in the front. Next door to it was the main whiskey barroom, which sold, “for five cents per dram, intoxicants that it is said will madden an ordinary brain in the few minutes.” Parlors were in the back for “card playing, social drinking, cock fighting,” and likely other forms of gambling. A *Nashville Daily American* reporter who visited the Watson saloon described the clientele he saw as forty

African American “river roustabouts and thieves. They were sitting around playing cards, with drinks in front of them.”²²

Nashville saloons were not particularly known for their music. Former regulars at the Men’s Quarter saloons said the lack of jazz music distinguished those places from similar establishments on Beale Street in Memphis. However, music could still be found at Black Bottom and other African-American saloons that had dance halls in their buildings. Dance halls tended to be large rooms in the rear or upstairs of the building with a piano to play music. At night, these spaces frequently had parties, coined “hullaballoos” where patrons could drink a few glasses of beer “and dance till black in the face.” White Nashvillians clearly had a problem with these dances as they were frequently raided by police. It may have been interracial or intersex contact that offended residents. The *Nashville American* said of these parties that “with more beers the dance would grow wilder and wilder until the cooche-cooche dance would look like a dirty deuce.” Dancing the night away was meant to be an escape from all the racism and poverty Nashville African Americans faced. The author Albert Murray referred to the activity as “stomping on the blues.”²³

In the Nashville saloon environment, music performed likely included a mixture of popular songs, minstrel tunes, and work songs. Blues music developed in the late nineteenth century and may not have appeared in Nashville saloons before many shut down their dance halls. At times, new sheet music was performed in saloons by African

²² “Black Bottom: A Saturday Evening in a Terrible Section,” *Daily American*, February 6, 1887, 4. Proquest (Document ID 939932908).

²³ George Barker, “Before the Shooting Started: The Era of Nickel Beer, Free Lunch;” “Bucket of Blood Raided by Police,” *Nashville American*, August 1, 1900, 3. Proquest (Document ID 938310450); Qtd in Michelle Scott, *Blues Empress in Black Chattanooga*, 111.

American porters and “itinerant” piano players who traveled from town to town. Some popular songs of the early twentieth century that may have appeared in Nashville included “Rufus, Rastus Johnson Brown,” “Nobody,” “Under the Bamboo Tree,” “All Coons Look Alike to Me,” and “Oh, Didn’t He Ramble.” Ragtime performances thrived at saloons in places like Nashville with performances by bands and piano players. Judging from newspaper articles describing loitering in front of Nashville African-American saloons, street performers may have also been prominent in their vicinity.²⁴

Variety theaters also sometimes served as a drinking establishment and entertainment option for the lower classes. At one known as the Park Theater, the first floor contained a box office and multiple barrooms while the second floor contained a standard theater. Upon a visit, the *Nashville Daily American* noted “there was music and singing; there was drinking and dancing; paint and spangles; dresses short and dresses shorter; bodices décolleté and bodices décolleté; laughter and rioting; night’s quiet invaded.” Adding horror to the scene for its audience, the paper further noted “there were men and women, young of each sex and old; beer was flowing like the slop it was, and tobacco smoke was adding its odors” to already unpleasant smells. The theater had a large staff of women to help sell their drinks, serve as escorts, and sometimes act as prostitutes after the bar closed. Further describing the scene, the *American* noted “Young girls sat in men’s arms in the presence of promiscuous others and dangled their bedecked

²⁴ Michelle Scott, *Blues Empress in Black Chattanooga*, 87, 98-100.

nethers and exhibited unhidden arms and necks in open defiance of the most lenient properties.”²⁵

Additional news coverage about the Park Theater suggested it was guilty of human trafficking. In one instance, two younger women were brought to the city from Chicago under the understanding that they would work as actresses. After learning they were to serve instead as escorts, they wanted to return home but were refused. It took the efforts of their parents and the assistance of the police to get them back to Chicago. Given the frequent connection of drinking establishments and prostitution, this was not the only case of human trafficking connected to saloons.²⁶

Saloons in Black Bottom were the primary places of recreation for wharf and industrial workers on the south side of Nashville. Establishments further north in the Hell’s Half Acre neighborhood often attracted an even wider audience. The slum neighborhood Hell’s Half Acre was located in the lowlands north and west of Capitol Hill. Sprawling areas of “shacks and lean-tos” provided residences for numerous African Americans.²⁷

²⁵ “Rampant Vice: The Park Theater and Its Nightly Orgies A Place That Is a Disagree to Nashville,” *Nashville Daily American*, September 5, 1887, 6. Proquest (Document ID 940688110).

²⁶ “Bad Man Done Up: Chet Smith, the Alleged Dramatic Agent, Goes to the Penitentiary,” *Nashville Daily American*, June 27, 1887, 7. Proquest (Document ID 950786339).

²⁷ Don Doyle, *Nashville in the New South 1880-1930* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 82.



Figure 9. This image shows an alley in the Hell's Half Acre neighborhood (also known as Capitol Hill neighborhood) around 1950. The photo was part of a collection completed as the neighborhood was prepared for demolition. Courtesy of the Metro Nashville Archives.

Hell's Half Acre received its name as a result of numerous fights and pistol shootings that occurred during the 1870s and 1880s. Perpetrators could not be punished as the area was outside the Nashville city limits at that time. Line Street became known as the primary thoroughfare for saloons and brothels in the neighborhood. According to William Waller's history of Nashville, because of the area's reputation, citizens were "embarrassed to get on the streetcar for Line Street when it was called out as ready." This may have been the reason that the street name changed to Jo Johnston Avenue in 1900.²⁸

²⁸ "Indian Mary: A Half Hour at Midnight in Hell's Half Acre," *Nashville Daily American*, August 10, 1886, 4. Proquest (Document ID 938853687); William Waller, *Nashville in the 1890s*, 143. For more information on Nashville prostitution during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Stephanie Chalifoux, "The Regulation of Female Sexual Deviance in Nashville, Tennessee, 1880-1920" (MA Thesis, Middle Tennessee State University, 2001) and James Jones, "'Municipal Vice: The Management of Prostitution in Tennessee's Urban Experience. Part I: The Experience of Nashville and Memphis, 1854-1917,'" *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 50 (1991) 33-41.

At saloons in Hell's Half Acre, Black Bottom, or in the Men's Quarter, rail connections ensured that Nashvillians had some variety in what they drank. Still, some beverages dominated. Southern historian William Garrott Brown noted in *Century Magazine* that for southerners "drink means ordinarily whisky and not at table or in the restraining company of women but in surroundings the least conducive to decency." Brown also noted, "of wines, the common people in the South know so little that they use the term 'wine' as if there were only one kind in the world. Beer, while of course a not uncommon beverage in the cities, does not find its way into the country." Judging from newspaper advertisements and other elements of the documentary record, Brown likely described Nashville well. Whiskey was clearly the most popular alcoholic drink in the city. In early twentieth-century issues of the *Nashville American*, pages were filled with large advertisements for the Tennessee whiskies made by Jack Daniel, George A. Dickel Company, and Greenbrier Distillery, among others.

For a city as large as Nashville, beer was made and distributed from relatively few places. Anheuser-Busch, Schlitz, and Nashville's Gerst were the only breweries featured prominently in the *American*. As of 1909, there was only one brewery in the Nashville area versus about thirteen distilleries in an eighty mile radius. When prohibitionists eventually came after the alcohol industry in Middle Tennessee, whiskey peddlers were there primary target.²⁹

²⁹ William Garrott Brown, "The South and the Saloon," *Century Magazine* 76 (July 1908): 465; "Distilleries and Breweries Must Close Tonight" *Nashville Tennessean*, December 31, 1909, 1.

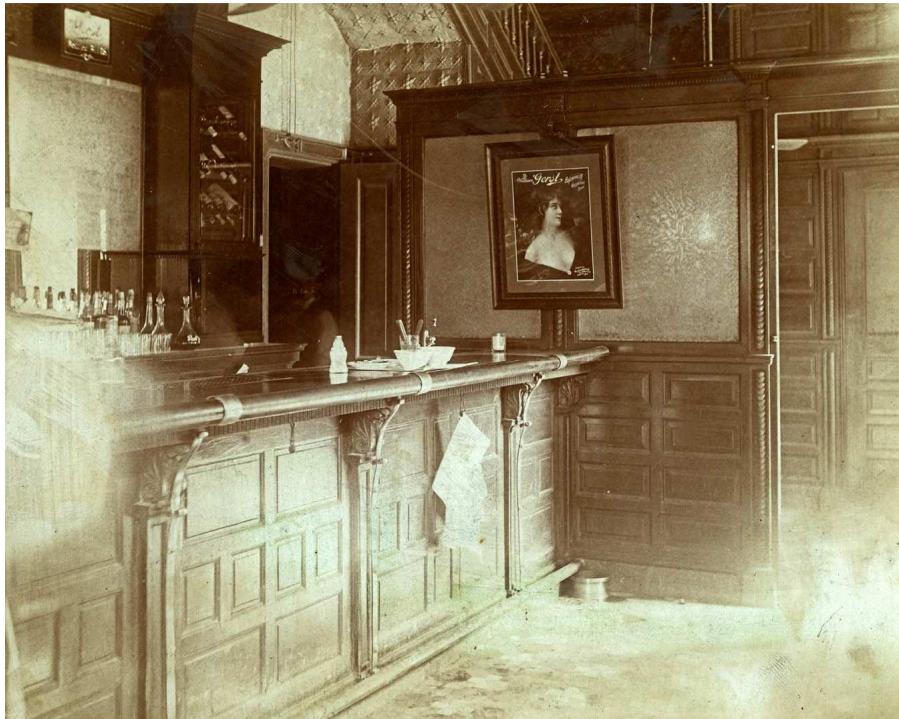


Figure 10. Few images exist of Nashville saloon interiors. This one shows the tap room at the Gerst brewery. Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

As the supply of alcohol became scarcer during the 1910s at the remaining open saloons in Nashville, moonshine became a popular beverage in the city. For farmers close to the city, moonshine served as a high-value, low-bulk commodity to sell. According to Louis Kyriakoudes' history of migration to Nashville, regional "Moonshining was centered in the Highland Rim counties that abutted the western and northern borders of Davidson County." The hilly terrain in those areas made them well suited to conceal stills from prohibition agents. Forty-two sources of moonshine were located in one raid on Sumner County. In Cheatham County, moonshiners outstripped the local grain supply. Responding to Nashville tastes, moonshiners produced beer as well. In one raid by federal agents, a Sumner County farmer was found to have a seventy-five gallon still as well as a brewery equipped with four fermenters. Farmers sold their moonshine in

Nashville by selling at the market in the Public Square or sometimes driving it straight to Nashville clients.³⁰

Saloons in Nashville could be divided primarily into wealthy and working-class categories. The wealthiest saloons were located in a downtown area centered on a block of Fourth Avenue North. They often were connected to a hotel, restaurant, or other business. Working-class saloons tended to be near industrial areas and African American slums. Many of them were connected to grocery stores and housed dance halls where African Americans listened to some of the latest music. The next chapter details the life of Sol Cohn, owner of one of Nashville's most popular working class establishments. At his saloon, along with most others, whiskey was the primary beverage but beer was also highly available. Moonshine became more available as prohibition laws became more strictly enforced.

³⁰ Louis Kyriakouides, *The Social Origins of the Urban South*, 62.

CHAPTER III: SOL COHN AND THE LIFE OF THE NASHVILLE SALOON
KEEPER

The South had one of the highest homicide rates in the country and the world. Lethal weapons could be found seemingly everywhere. As Edward Ayers put it, “guns as well as life were cheap.” Saloons were often the site of altercations. Sol Cohn, Nashville saloon keeper, appeared in the newspaper for one of the first times after stabbing a man to death:

[Cohn] the white man [,] carried a knife in his hand as he approached the negro [Bud Stearnes, a drunken employee].... Cohn’s evident object was to eject the negro from the house, but he was speedily compelled to relinquish this idea and fight for his life. Stearnes was a man of powerful physique, standing over six feet and weighing about 200 pounds... Cohn is a man of average size, but is powerfully muscled...[Stearnes] seized Cohn about the body with a vise- like grip, pinning the hand in which Cohn held the knife to the latter’s side.

Eventually Stearnes tripped over a pile of watermelons and Cohn used the opportunity to stab him in the chest. A crowd restrained Cohn from slitting Stearnes throat as well. In a period of fifteen minutes, blood flowed out of Stearnes mouth as he bled to death, This was only one of a series of violent crimes associated with Cohn and his saloon during approximately forty five years in the alcohol business. Cohn’s name became connected to everything wrong with saloons.¹

Sol Cohn was born on November 16, 1867, the son of German Jewish immigrants in Nashville. His parents, Samuel Cohn and Caroline Schiff, arrived in the United States some time before 1858 when they were married in Nashville. Their wedding had to be

¹ Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 153-155; “Fatal Knife Thrust: Sol Cohn Stabs Bud Stearnes,” August, 6, 1894, *Nashville Daily American*, 5. Proquest (Document ID 940711453).

legalized by a justice of the peace because Tennessee rabbis could not legally unite people in marriage until 1879.²

Sol was one of several brothers who became prominent in Nashville's Jewish community. Charles Cohn served on the Nashville City Council for much of the early twentieth century and was the president of that organization at times. Nathan Cohn was a prominent lawyer in Nashville and served on the American Jewish Committee as well as in many local organizations.³

Sol's father likely died in 1871 according to an insolvency notice that appeared in the newspaper that year. This forced Sol and his brothers into the business world at a relatively early age. By 1880 Sol's mother Caroline worked as a peddler while his brothers Israel and Hyman worked as clerks. Later in the decade, most of the Cohn children including Sol were clerks at some point. For at least several years, they lived at the Black Bottom home of Alexander Iser, Nashville's first rabbi and the brother-in-law of Caroline Cohn.⁴

² Some isolated census records have indicated that Sol's father was from Poland while his mother was from Russia. Numerous spellings of the Cohn last name have made research difficult. Before the 1880s, Sol's family largely used the spelling "Cohen." Even into the twentieth century, Sol occasionally had his last name spelling "Cohen" in newspapers.; Ancestry.com, "1930 United States Federal Census for Sol Cohern" in Ancestry.com (accessed 17 July 2013). Original Source: United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1930. T626, 2,667 rolls; Ancestry.com. "Tennessee, Death Records, 1908-1958 for Sol Cohn" in Ancestry.com (accessed 17 July 2013). Original Source: *Tennessee Death Records, 1908-1958*. Nashville, Tennessee: Tennessee State Library and Archives; Lee Dorman, *Nashville's Jewish Community* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2010), 20.

³ "Sol Cohn Beaten by Police Sergt Sadler," *Nashville Tennessean and the Nashville American*, July 26, 1912, 3. Proquest (Document ID 906661400); William Waller, *Nashville in the 1890s* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1970), 225.

⁴ "Insolvent Notice," *Nashville Republican Banner*. July 16, 1871, 2. Proquest (Document ID 952102241); Ancestry.com, "1880 United States Federal Census for Caroline Cohen" in Ancestry.com (accessed 17 July 2013). Original Source: Tenth Census of the United States, 1880. (NARA microfilm publication T9, 1,454 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C.

According to Ewa Morawska's history of the Jews in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, new jobseekers in smaller cities relied on an "entrepreneurial network of storekeepers, wholesalers, and skilled tradesmen who offered services to the general population." This was the case for Sol and his brothers in Nashville as they grew older. By 1885 Charles and Sam Cohn were running a tobacco and stationary store on Cherry Street. While Nathan Cohn was developing a law practice and Charles built a business involving lumber, Sol opened his saloon and grocery store by 1891 according to city directories.⁵

The Cohn saloon was primarily a whiskey establishment. One twentieth-century memoir called the place a "barrel house." The saloon, also known as the "Bucket of Blood," was "filled with barrels of whiskey on racks along the walls. From the barrels, out of wooden spigots, whiskey would be drawn into bottles for the use of the bartender or for the customer to take out. A newspaper article from 1894 noted that "the dive of which Sol Cohn is the proprietor is a perfect omnibus of vice. On the floor above the saloon, grocery store and barber shop, is a dance hall, gambling rooms and pool and billiard parlors."⁶

Early on, Cohn developed a poor reputation among many in the Nashville community, especially temperance advocates. Much of this notoriety was earned from the fact that he focused on African Americans as his primary clientele. As a result, actions against him were often tied to changing relations between whites and blacks. As Cohn

⁵ Marni Davis, *Jews and Booze: Becoming American in the Age of Prohibition* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 93; Joel Davis, compiler, *Nashville Directory: Volume XXI 1885* (Nashville, TN: Marshall & Bruce Publishers, 1885), 160; Joel Davis, compiler, *Nashville Directory: Volume 27 1891* (Nashville, TN: Marshall & Bruce Publishers, 1891), 223.

⁶ William Waller, *Nashville in the 1890s*, 225; "Fatal Knife Thrust: Sol Cohn Stabs Bud Starnes," August, 6, 1894, *Nashville Daily American*, 5.

was developing his business during the 1890s and into the twentieth century, racial relations in the South were declining to particularly low levels. That period was the apex of lynching, Jim Crow laws, and disfranchisement. During that timeframe, the stereotype of black men being beasts became popular, and prohibition advocates embraced this idea. Prohibition was advocated as an action that could keep blacks from raping white women.⁷

In Atlanta, the result of paranoia connected to stereotype was a major race riot in 1906. Several exaggerated newspaper stories that reported assaults upon white women helped lead to the violence. On the evening of September 22, a mob of several thousand white men stormed the Decatur Street neighborhood and attacked its black residents. This area was much like Nashville's Black Bottom. Saloons very similar to Cohn's were primary targets of destruction. Rioters broke windows, drank what they found inside, and attacked black people and black-owned businesses. Investigative articles written about the riot's causes were some of the first to note the important role of Jewish saloon keepers in selling alcohol to African Americans. Some stories released after the riot focused on this point as well as the involvement of Jews in prostitution schemes and old accusations that they were economically unscrupulous. Jews in the South who frequently treated black customers with deference and respect caused whites to worry they were blurring "the racial divide in potentially dangerous ways."⁸

Less than two years after the Atlanta riots, similar paranoia in Nashville led political authorities to take a stand against lewd labels on liquor bottles. This movement originated with the revival of a story of the 1905 murder of fourteen year old Margaret

⁷ Joe Coker, *Liquor in the Land of the Lost Cause*, 157-158.

⁸ Marni Davis, *Jews and Booze*, 122-125.

Lear in Shreveport, Louisiana. While walking home from high school, she went past a “negro saloon.” “Out of that saloon staggered a negro named Coleman – ‘drunken, ... on cheap gin.’ He followed her to a ditch on the edge of a field, assaulted her, and shot her.”⁹ A series of 1908 articles written by Will Irwin in *Collier’s Weekly* blamed this crime and others like it on cheap gin bottles, with suggestive labels, that turned African Americans into beasts. Irwin particularly targeted Lee Levy, a Jewish distiller in St. Louis. Irwin had no way to know whether Coleman actually drank Levy’s gin. However, Levy’s product made a tempting target because it was available in most Southern bars catering to African-Americans and carried the name “Black Cock Vigor Gin.” The *Nashville Tennessean*, the city’s prohibition-supporting paper, quickly picked up on the story.¹⁰

The *Tennessean* argued that the conditions present in Shreveport at the time of the Lear murder were currently present in Nashville and other Tennessee cities. The paper proclaimed, “Do you think the fate of Margaret Lear may not come to the innocent school girl or the virtuous woman of Tennessee? As always, the liquor man is doing his hellish part. If the sequel does not follow the fault will not be his.” The gin that supposedly led to the Lear murder was made by Lee Levy & Co. and the *Tennessean* pointed out where it was being sold in Nashville. All of the locations listed happened to cater to residents of the Black Bottom neighborhood, and one of them was Sol Cohn’s saloon. The article clearly depicted saloon keepers as the abettors of the “black beast.” It noted the listed

⁹ Will Irwin, qtd in Joe Coker, *Liquor in the Land of the Lost Cause*, 163

¹⁰ Joe Coker, *Liquor in the Land of the Lost Cause*, 163; “Who Killed Margaret Lear: Some Light on the Astounding Viciousness of the Liquor Traffic in the Southern States, Including Our Own Tennessee,” *Nashville Tennessean*, June 16, 1908, 1. Proquest (Document ID 906894501). The *Nashville Tennessean* was founded by Luke Lea in 1907. For the first few years of its existence, its purpose was almost solely to promote the prohibitionist cause; Marni Davis, *Jews and Booze*, 129.

saloons were all owned by white men; “white bartenders deal out the gin and take pains to explain to the black purchasers the obscene labels and the mysterious qualities of this gin.”¹¹

Nashville leaders took the supposed threat from this gin very seriously. Mayor J. S. Brown had ordered Nashville police to “immediately set on foot a thorough inspection of every saloon in the city for the purpose of ascertaining if any of these saloons are selling or have on hand in stock any of this gin.” If any was found, the bottles were to be destroyed and the saloon keepers arrested. Less than two weeks after the *Tennessean*’s appeal was published, five liquor dealers were arrested for possession of Levy bottles. Among those were Sol Cohn and his business partner at the time, city councilman H. C. Criswell. They were arrested after a Levy gin bottle was found in a raid and destroyed. Cohn and Criswell were released quickly after it was discovered that the found label was only being used as prop for a joke.¹²

The *Nashville American*’s description of these gin bottles suggests the level of paranoia existing by 1908 about African-Americans and alcohol. They described the label colors as cheap. “It is only when held upside down and in a peculiar position with the hand or other object covering most of the picture that what appears to be a nude, or partially nude female figure appears.” Despite its likely tameness, the bottles were used

¹¹ “To the Manhood of Tennessee,” *Nashville Tennessean*, June 16, 1908, 1. Proquest (Document ID 906893190).

¹² “Police Made Five Arrests: On Account of Levy Gin,” *Nashville American*, June 25, 1908, 10. Proquest (Document ID 944253003); “Saloonists Cleared: Dealers Dismissed by Judge Baker on Charge of Selling ‘Campaign’ Gin,” June 26, 1908, 10. Proquest (Document ID 940527016).

as props in the gubernatorial campaign of Edward Carmack. They were displayed at Carmack headquarters and at rallies supporting prohibition across Tennessee.¹³

Being arrested for selling Levy gin was one of a series of arrests that Cohn faced during his alcohol peddling career. Sol like many fellow Nashvillians had a habit of being arrested for being drunk and disorderly. In one 1894 incident, he was charged with that crime and for resisting arrest. Upon a court appearance, he was forced to pay a \$20 fine. Other times Cohn went to court for selling alcohol on Sunday. Typically the punishment was just a fine.¹⁴

For saloons like Cohn's that served African Americans, police raids over gambling were extremely common. Saloon keepers and gamblers were arrested if caught. Other raids were sometimes launched against Cohn's saloon for disturbing the peace and other crimes. In those cases, all the customers in the saloon might be arrested and sent to jail a carload at a time. Others awaited the return of the officer because it was not considered shameful in Black Bottom for a resident to go to jail. According to a history compiled by Bobby Lovett, "Going to jail was part of having a good time on the weekends in Black Bottom."¹⁵

Cohn did not interact well with people who had raided his saloon or interfered with his business activities. In one event early in his career, Sol was arrested for contempt

¹³ "An Exaggerated Incident," *Nashville American*, June 21, 1908, 4. Proquest (Document ID 929183575); Paul Isaac, *Prohibition and Politics*, 148-149.

¹⁴ "Sol Cohn's Jag," *Nashville Daily American*, September 8, 1894. 5. Proquest (Document ID 962452769); "Alleged Sunday Tipplers," *Nashville American*, October 15, 1894. 3. Proquest (Document ID 956812953).

¹⁵ "Gambling-Rooms Raided," *Nashville American*, July 16, 1895. 5. Proquest (Document ID 940708813); Bobby Lovett, ed., *From Winter to Winter : the Afro-American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1870-1930* (Nashville, TN: Tennessee State University, 1981),193.

of court. He was accused of trying to bribe a witness into not testifying and then threatening him with death if he did testify. Further arrest accounts showed that Cohn had a proclivity for violence. In 1897, Sol was arrested for visiting an African American who owed him 90 cents and threatening to shoot him with a pistol unless he paid his debt.¹⁶ In 1899, Sol Cohn was responsible for the shooting of another person. The victim was John Adams, an African American patron of his saloon who reportedly became quarrelsome. As another person tried to calm him down, Adams came toward him with a knife. While the other person was defending himself with a butcher's cleaver, Cohn shot the man four times.¹⁷

With alcohol law enforcement becoming more stringent, Cohn faced more serious punishment for selling alcohol on a Sunday in 1907. Cohn was arrested when officers observed activity in his saloon through a hole they had opened in the building's brick wall. Sol's lawyers challenged making a hole in the brick wall as a legitimate way to gather evidence. Cohn appealed his conviction until the United State Supreme Court case *Sol Cohn vs The State of Tennessee* upheld the actions of the Nashville Police. As Cohn and fellow saloon owner William Hartman were set to be sent to the Davidson County Workhouse for two months, both fled Nashville. For about two months, they travelled

¹⁶ "Sol Cohn in Trouble," *Nashville American*, November 14, 1895. 4. Proquest (Document ID 950630422); "Over a Small Debt," *Nashville American*, August 4, 1897. 6. Proquest (Document ID 957077065).

¹⁷ "John Adams Shot by Sol Cohen," *Nashville American*, November 27, 1899. 2. Proquest (Document ID 962429584).

around northern cities. Both eventually came back to Nashville and served their time in the workhouse.¹⁸

The arrests Cohn faced during his career were fairly typical for a person owning a saloon catering to African Americans. Enforcement of existing laws related to alcohol was much stricter in African American areas, even decades before prohibition. Numerous accounts exist of other Nashville saloon owners being arrested for operating on Sunday and operating gambling parlors. By the early twentieth century, even wealthier saloon operators faced arrest for running gambling parlors.¹⁹

Violating the law made saloon owners like Sol Cohn relatively unpopular to Nashville residents. How unpopular Sol Cohn was to the Jewish community and his family is unclear. Managing a saloon was not uncommon for a Jewish person in Nashville. It did not threaten his religious status as he was married by a rabbi and his son had received a Bar Mitzvah. Yet, when Nathan Cohn was honored at a dinner by one of the city's Jewish organizations, several brothers were there but not Sol. Sol's name rarely appeared in newspaper articles with those of his brothers. In fact, he was only ever mentioned with his brother Charles. In one case, Sol was beaten over the head by a police sergeant. His brother Charles, who was also head of the Nashville City Council, was reported afterward to have gone to the police chief to help seek redress. The other time

¹⁸ "Sunday Tipplers Go to the Workhouse: Supreme Court Affirms Sentence of Sol Cohn, Wm. Hartman And Others," *Nashville Tennessean*, March 15, 1908. 3. Proquest (Document ID 902891641); "Hartman and Cohn Give Themselves Up," *Nashville Tennessean*, July 16, 1908. 1. Proquest (Document ID 910691515).

¹⁹ One of the more dramatic raids on a saloon at occurred at the Southern Turf during 1903. Numerous people tried to jump out windows as the police arrived without warning. As prisoners were escorted into carriages, several escaped including a city councilman For more on the raid, see "Pool-Room at Southern Turf: Raid by Police Results in Twenty-Five Arrests," *Nashville American*, December 13, 1903, 1. Proquest (Document ID 924687127).

both Cohn brothers appeared together in the newspaper was in a letter to the editor criticizing Charles' opposition to restricting saloons to the downtown area. It pointed out that he had a brother who would be affected. That letter to the editor suggests that politics were the likely reason Charles sought some distance from Sol in public. However, as they were allied with the same politicians, it seems unlikely that they did not ever collaborate with each other.²⁰

When not the target of a witch hunt, Cohn's saloon was accused of having the most crime. Its patrons, African Americans in Black Bottom, were perceived as tramps "that followed up and down railroads and gambled and drank whiskey" after they had been paid wages. Residents in the neighborhood largely served as factory and wharf workers. For those in Black Bottom, the rest of Nashville, and the South, crime was an increasing problem as the region urbanized during the 1890s and 1900s. A disproportionate number of incidents occurred at saloons.²¹

In a few accounts, Cohn's saloon was nicknamed the Bucket of Blood (possibly after a famous saloon in Virginia City, Nevada). According to a writer for the *Nashville Daily American*, "dealing with a set of thieves, thugs, and toughs, Cohn has necessarily had a hard time keeping them straight, and while money has flowed ceaselessly into his coffers, it has constantly been to the tune of bloody shooting and cutting affrays." For the

²⁰ Ada Scott Rice, "Society," *Nashville American*, March 16, 1905, 6. Proquest (Document ID 939592627); "Nashville Friends Honor Nathan Cohn," *Nashville Tennessean and the Nashville American*, April 20, 1915, 12. Proquest (Document ID 920613887); "Sol Cohn Beaten by Police Sergt. Sadler," *Nashville Tennessean and the Nashville American*, July 26, 1912, 3. Proquest (Document ID 906661400).

²¹ Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 153-155.

police, the place had become a “synonym for crime, and the scene of continual drunken and disorderly rows.”²²

In one instance of a murder on a Saturday afternoon in March 1905, Jim Bell, an African American steamboat roustabout, was shot twice by Shelby Woods, another African American, at Sol Cohn’s saloon. According to the *Nashville American*, Bell supposedly brought about his own end by beginning the day saying “he was going to kill somebody or be killed before the close of the day. Bell was drinking and had been at the saloon during the day, when it is said that he tried to start trouble.” He had already had one knife taken away from him but still had more in his possession. During this time Shelby Woods was standing at the front of the saloon serving as a porter. Bell came up and started throwing empty beer bottles at him. “Woods retreated and was followed by his antagonist, who is said to have drawn a knife.” Woods then drew a revolver and fired three shots, two hitting Bell. Jim Bell, died a few minutes after police officers arrived.²³

After years of operating in Black Bottom, Cohn’s original saloon business was forced to close before July 1907 due to a city law that restricted drinking establishments to the immediate downtown. However, his grocery store on Fourth Avenue South was left open. With the closure of that saloon, he opened another with business partner H. C. Criswell on Broadway. In little over a year during October 1908, that partnership ended.

²² “Fatal Knife Thrust: Sol Cohn Stabs Bud Starnes,” *Nashville Daily American*, August, 6, 1894. 5.

²³ “Roustabout Killed,” *Nashville American*, March 26, 1905, 5. Proquest (Document ID 952709559).

Cohn was under indictment, on the run from the authorities, and at the Davidson County Workhouse during that time, which may have helped bring the partnership to an end.²⁴

In less than a year after Cohn ended his partnership with Criswell, statewide prohibition came into effect. Its early 1909 passage was assisted by the fact saloons had been banned in rural areas for years and that prominent prohibition supporter Edward Carmack had recently been killed in duel. Statewide prohibition likely motivated Cohn's entry into the bootlegging business. Sol ran operations from his former saloon property that he had transformed into a soft drink stand. Swiftly he was charged with prohibition law violations. In one case during August 1909, police officers were at the premises of Lillian Brown when two cases of beer were delivered to her. Brown claimed they came from Sol Cohn.²⁵

By the time prohibition passed the Tennessee legislature in early 1909, Cohn was a major political target. At no point was this more evident than when his name was dragged into the feud between former senator Edward Carmack and Duncan Cooper, advisor to Governor Malcolm Patterson. In one editorial by Edward Carmack, he noted a story from Lauderdale County in which supporters of Governor Malcolm Patterson "are advocating knifing Bryan and the whole Democratic ticket, unless the Governor is given united support." Carmack then stated "we respectfully direct the attention of the Hon. Ben Murray, the Hon. Dunc Cooper, the Hon. Max Hartman, the Hon. Solomon Cohn, and the other Honorables to this blood-curdling threat." For a person like Duncan

²⁴ "No Reduction in Revenue of City," *Nashville Tennessean*, July 1, 1907. 6. Proquest (Document ID 904664725); "Dissolution Notice," *Nashville American*, October 10, 1908. 10. Proquest (Document ID 940628586).

²⁵ "Police Arrest Sol Cohn," *Nashville American*, August 9, 1909. 10. Proquest (Document ID 939861081).

Cooper, the worst thing about that statement was being associated with people like Sol Cohn and Max Hartman, another bar owner.

Once Edward Carmack had been killed, Sol Cohn's name became prominent in testimony during the trial of the Coopers. In testimony, Duncan Cooper was asked by his defense attorney who Sol Cohn was, and he responded "a divekeeper in Black Bottom"

Q. - What kind of dive? What is a dive?

A. - I can only tell you what kind of dive from notoriety, through the papers. I was never in the place.

Q. - What was it generally understood in the community - that is what I want to get at?

A. - It was alleged to be, the resort of Negro men and women, and the lower class of whites, in Black Bottom.

.....

Q. - You used the words "Black Bottom." tell the jury what that means?

A. - Well, I cannot describe it, except it is the most notorious, disreputable part of the city - notoriously disreputable.

Q. - Is that the blackest spot in the city of Nashville?

A. - So regarded.

Q. - Lowest down?

A. - Yes, sir; from public notoriety.

.....

Q. - Please state whether or not it was publicly known that this Cohn, Sol Cohn place, was a "hullaballo hall?"

A. - Well, not knowing exactly what a "hullabaloo hall" is, I couldn't say; I know it was a notorious resort, as depicted in the daily papers.

Q. - For lewd men and women - negroes?

A. - I stated so before.

Through this testimony that was circulated in newspapers across the United States, Cohn was effectively advertised as Nashville's premier dive keeper. His notoriety was heavily visible in news coverage following the trial.²⁶

²⁶ "Sixth Day," *Nashville American*, February 24, 1909. 9-10. Proquest (Document ID 940609929).

OPENING SCENE IN THE COOPER-CARMACK TRIAL



Figure 11. Image of the Cooper Trial in the *Nashville American* during February 1909. Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

Statewide prohibition passed the Tennessee legislature a few months after Carmack's death. In cities like Nashville, it faced a backlash through the election of candidates who refused to enforce it. The most prominent for Nashville was Hilary Howse who became mayor in 1909. People in Nashville's alcohol industry worked the hardest to keep Howse in power. What was termed the "Howse Machine" included many liquor dealers, saloon owners, and druggists who worked on a ward level to support the mayor. Sol Cohn was considered a key part of the machine and this led to accounts of him committing voter fraud. On election day in 1910, the *Nashville Tennessean* encouraged "cast a vote today which will offset that of Sol Cohn, and help make a decent city of Nashville."²⁷

²⁷ Don Doyle, *Nashville in the New South*, 168; "Editorial Article," *Nashville Tennessean*, August 4, 1910, 4. Proquest (Document ID 904645425).

In one 1910 *Tennessean* article, Cohn was accused of being at the polling place influencing voters. It was said that “many mysterious whisperings went on between the illustrious saloon magnate and his beerette soaked victims.” The *Nashville Tennessean* concluded that Cohn must have offered African Americans “renewed credit, and reminded them of the ‘education’ they had so recently received.” When an African American emerged from the voting booth, “the whisperings were repeated, and the smile that played about Sol’s mouth had broadened – the machine had received another vote.” The beneficiaries were anti-prohibition politicians such as Nashville Mayor Hillary Howse.²⁸


During the 1911 election, Sol Cohn somehow managed to take over the counting of ballots in the twelfth ward. When the election supervisor visited the ward, he asked Cohn where the regular clerks were. He claimed they had gone to dinner and yet never returned before the ballot counting was finished. Despite the fact Cohn was not actually a resident of that ward, he was allowed the task of handling African-American voters at the polls. After handling paperwork, “he did all in his power to mark their ballot for them.”²⁹

In later elections, it was advertised that voting for a certain candidate meant voting in favor of Sol Cohn and crime. One 1910 ad declared “Hop Lee and Sol are for [Judge] Hart and crime. How about you?” In the election for Davidson County attorney-general during 1917, candidate Lurton Goodpasture stated that Sol Cohn was “bending

²⁸ “Busy Day for Noted Saloonist,” *Nashville Tennessean*, August 5, 1910. 8. Proquest (Document ID 904686683).

²⁹ “Sol Cohn Takes Over Election in 12th,” *Nashville Tennessean and the Nashville American*, October 13, 1911. 12. Proquest (Document ID 906947616).

every energy” to get one of his opponents elected. The other one of his opponents was supposedly in favor of loose saloon regulation as well.³⁰



DON'T BE DECEIVED

Opponent No. 1—He is the same G. B. Kirkpatrick that has been defeated three times for Circuit Judge; he is the same G. B. Kirkpatrick that Sol Cohn is bending every energy to elect Attorney-General. I have charged him with being an experienced defender of the bootlegger and he has not denied it. In my practice for the past six years I have handled cases in the United States Court, in the Supreme Court, in this State, the Court of Appeals and in all the other courts. The charge made by Sol Cohn's man, G. B. Kirkpatrick, that I have had only one case in the Circuit Court is false, silly and a veiled attempt to deceive the voters. I am going to be elected, and no caucusing coterie of ward manipulators can prevent it. The gang that is advocating Kirkpatrick is the same gang that disrupted Nashville. Their tactics are the same, and his "soft pedal" speeches made throughout the campaign to "go thy way and sin no more" were intended for ears that have heard and understood. I am a representative of no clan or gang, but of all the people, and I thank my friends for their untiring efforts in my behalf and assure them their efforts will redound to the credit of our community and State.

Opponent No. 2—He is the present incumbent in office, who is seeking 16 years on the record "wet" at one end and "dry" at the other. For law enforcement at one end and blocking the enforcement of the law at the other. The State has expended thousands of dollars to encourage him in the enforcement of the law. Public sentiment has shifted his policies from post to pillar. His record stands both for and against the enforcement of the law.

Lurton Goodpasture For Attorney-General

Figure 12. Political ad in the *Nashville Tennessean and the Nashville American* during November 1917. Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

Dealing with Sol Cohn the bootlegger was as potentially dangerous as dealing with Cohn the saloonist. In 1913, Sol was arrested for pulling a pistol after he was

³⁰ "Editorial Article," *Nashville Tennessean*, August 3, 1910, 4. Proquest (Document ID 906653436); "Don't Be Deceived," *Nashville Tennessean and the Nashville American*, November 22, 1917, 8. Proquest (Document ID 905756786).

slapped by a salesman. Several deputies of the Nashville Police and the Davidson County Sheriff restrained Cohn before he could fire.³¹

In 1914, the *Nashville Tennessean* and the *Nashville American* proclaimed “Sol Cohn has surrendered. The man who has been known as the ‘king of Black Bottom,’ ... has bowed his head for the dictates of the law, and he announced ... that he had severed connection with the liquor business forever.” Increasing law enforcement pressure upon bootlegging likely caused Sol Cohn to make this statement in front of a courtroom. Most surprising was how readily Cohn was believed. The newspaper noted, “Sheriff Longhurst is convinced that Mr. Cohn means exactly what he says, and that this landmark in the Nashville saloon business has eliminated himself forever from the sale of liquor in Nashville.” Cohn’s statement was not true and was likely uttered to reduce police harassment of his activities. Judging from the amount of raids conducted on his business during the next five years, this ploy did not work.³²

Coverage of a raid on Sol Cohn’s former saloon and now bootleg stand in 1915 was notable for listing what was seized. Unfortunately, as he was in jail at the time, it is unknown whether the property confiscated was his. The alcohol seized included:

fifty-two half pints of Fine Old Cogan whisky, 1 half pint of Old Joe Perkins whisky, 7 half pints of Cascade whisky, 27 half pints of Favorite whisky, 8 bottles of Uncle Tom gin, 19 half pints of Jack Daniel whisky, 5 pints of Jack Daniel whisky, one-half quart Imperial Boone Kamp Bitters, 1 bottle Paki gin, 1 quart Cascade whisky, 1 quart Imperial Liquers, 16 pints apple brandy, 68 quart bottles of beer.

³¹ “Sol Cohn Pulls Gun When Slapped,” *Nashville Tennessean and the Nashville American*, May 16, 1913. 12. Proquest (Document ID 905787654).

³² “Sol Cohn Quits Liquor Business,” *Nashville Tennessean and the Nashville American*, March 11, 1914. 7. Proquest (Document ID 906591310).

Noticeable in this list of alcohol was its quality. In 1915, many of the distilleries that were once found in Tennessee were still operating in other states such as Kentucky or Missouri. Kentucky, source of much of the liquor in Nashville, did not force its distilleries to close until 1919 with the institution of statewide prohibition.³³

Con-artistry was part of Cohn's success at bootlegging. In 1917 the Nashville Deputy Coroner learned that he was selling beerette, a beverage containing very little alcohol, as actual beer. Bottles sold from 35 to 40 cents and Cohn surprisingly admitted to a reporter that patrons "are going after it like a hog after slop." The reporter noted Cohn's customers "thought they were buying beer and it was represented to them that they were buying beer, for Sol said that when automobile parties called and bought six bottles at a time he would tell them to hurry away with the stuff, as the officers of the law might arrive at any time."³⁴

Despite all the offences Cohn had committed, he had never spent more than a few months incarcerated through the 1910s. This was because even without Hilary Howse, enforcement of bootlegging laws was problematic in Nashville. Russell Miller, special attorney for the State of Tennessee, noted that problems began with initial arrests by the police. Suspects were often not personally known to the police and gave fictitious names. After paying \$50 bond, they would flee from police custody. The next day in court, an arrest warrant would be filed under the fake name. It was estimated that 90% of money collected by local courts for bootlegging offenses came from bond forfeitures rather than

³³ "Pay Another Visit to Sol Cohn's Place," *Nashville Tennessean and the Nashville American*, November 11, 1915. 12. Proquest (Document ID 920664057).

³⁴ "Sol Cohn Patterns after P. T. Barnum," *Nashville Tennessean and the Nashville American*, August 17, 1917. 6. Proquest (Document ID 906972504).

finer. The progress of the court was further hurt by a backlog of hundreds of indictments it faced. Most of those were for people who never could be caught. For those who made it to trial, the prosecutor had to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the accused sold alcohol on the date mentioned in their indictment. Sometimes law enforcement paid witnesses known as pigeons were used against accused bootleggers. This usually resulted in an acquittal because juries did not trust them. Miller noted that "at present there is no systematic method of disposing of cases. As a result, it makes it difficult to secure attendance of witnesses or defendants and prevents the orderly dispatch of cases."³⁵

According to Ed Huddleston's history of Nashville bootlegging, weak law enforcement helped Cohn acquire a small fortune of about a half million dollars. Sensing the danger of the business, however, he retired from it around 1922. Through the 1920s, he dealt with many investments including real estate, stocks, and bonds. The Great Depression did not immediately affect Sol Cohn. Cohn lost a chunk of money trying to help some friends who co-owned a large garage with him. More money was lost in the collapse of several Tennessee banks. Losing much of his fortune motivated Cohn's return to bootlegging in the early 1930s.

Sol Cohn's bootlegging activities were eventually stopped when he was arrested by the police in 1935 carrying liquor from Kentucky. Kentucky had passed a law in 1934 that had allowed liquor warehouses to open. Facilities that opened up from Franklin to the Hopkinsville area flooded Nashville with Kentucky-made whiskey. Theoretically, Cohn could have legally carried booze from Kentucky to another state such as Florida

³⁵ "Explains Clogs in Enforcement of Liquor Laws: Russell Miller Tells of Handicaps in Prosecuting Cases against Bootleggers," *Nashville Tennessean and the Nashville American*, July 15, 1918. 8. Proquest (Document ID 928085160).

that had ended prohibition. Instead, he was part of the traffic to Nashville. Normally Cohn hired a driver to haul liquor to Nashville. When the driver was caught, Cohn could avoid punishment. By not using a driver one Friday in September, Cohn suffered a traffic violation that proved to be his downfall. Sol's lawyers argued that the search of his vehicle was illegal. This defense did not work and Cohn began his only prison term in January 1937. It lasted for nine months. Sol Cohn died a free man on April 30, 1939, the only man to work as a prominent saloon owner and bootlegger in Nashville into the 1930s. Eleven days later, elections were held to allow new drinking establishments in Tennessee cities that wanted them. The complexity of the laws created in the 1930s led to a whole new generation of bar owners who skirted legal standards.³⁶

Sol Cohn's life was representative of many saloon owners who sold to African Americans. Living and working in a slum forced Cohn to develop a business acumen and toughness while running his establishment. As prohibition sentiment increased in Nashville, Cohn was forced to adapt by becoming more involved in politics and switching his business to bootlegging. The poor reputation Cohn obtained from his political activities and alcohol selling led him toward becoming a symbol of the evil dive keeper in the battle to close Nashville's saloons.

³⁶ Ed Huddleston, *The Bootleg Era* (Nashville, TN: The Nashville Banner, 1957), 26-27.

CHAPTER IV: SALOON POLITICS AND REFORM IN THE CAPITAL CITY

On November 9, 1908, Colonel Duncan Cooper, his son Robin, and former US senator Edward Carmack met in violent confrontation at the corner of Seventh Avenue and Union Street in Nashville. After being on opposing sides during the 1908 Tennessee governor's election, Carmack and the Coopers had become political enemies over the issue of saloons. After bystanders dived out of the way, Carmack "flung himself behind two utility poles that stood there side by side, and he raised his gun and pointed it toward Colonel Cooper." Carmack's first shot ended up hitting Robin's shoulder and another shot ripped through the left sleeve of his coat. Then, "Carmack stood in profile, his right arm raised to his chest, his pistol now pointed toward Robin. And Robin shot him three times as fast as he could pull the trigger."¹ The day after the shooting, the *Nashville Tennessean* wrote, "Because he dared to oppose the might of the saloons in Tennessee, Edward Ward Carmack lies cold in death, and three gaping wounds cry out for vengeance on his murders."² Carmack became a martyr to the prohibitionist cause. Yet, his death was only the climax of a political story involving reformers, violence, corruption, and alliances that led to the end of the legal saloon.

While American temperance movements had their origin early in the nineteenth century, their activity was limited in Tennessee until after the American Civil War. In the aftermath of the war, evangelical advocates of temperance were kept busy changing the behavior of their congregants. After 1880, southern evangelicals shifted goals and

¹ James Summerville, *Carmack-Cooper Shooting: Tennessee Politics Turns Violent* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1994), 17.

² "Senator Carmack is Shot Down in Cold Blood," *Nashville Tennessean*, November 9, 1908, 1. Proquest (Document ID 904620660).

worked to rid society of alcohol. They went about this by embracing teetotalism, using legal arguments as well as moral, employing multiple lines of argument to influence a variety of audiences, and increasing political activity. Representative of this shift, Edgar Estes Folk, a Tennessee Baptist minister declared, “Some say use moral suasion against the saloon, and tell their boys to keep away from the saloon. That is good, but let us have legal suasion too, which will keep the saloon away from the boys. Let us have both kinds of suasion.”³

As evangelicals launched a greater campaign to rid the South of alcohol, E. E. Folk became their most prominent voice in Tennessee. Folk served as owner and editor of Nashville’s *Baptist and Reflector* newspaper, one of the most vocal publications in favor of prohibition, from 1889 until 1997. In 1896, he organized the Local Option League in Tennessee. In 1899 that organization became the Tennessee Anti-Saloon League, and Folk served as its leader for twenty years. Folk and the Southern Baptists were a powerful lobbying force upon state government. During an 1896 address, the legislature was reminded that they represent “125,000 white Baptists.”⁴

Tennessee evangelicals preferred seeking the ban of saloons through the usage of mile laws. These laws restricted drinking establishments from being within a certain range of schools or churches. Evangelicals reasoned that persuading the legislature to put the majority of Tennessee under prohibition by means of mile laws, “would be easier than convincing the majority of voters in incorrigibly wet areas to impose it on themselves via local option.” In 1877, mile laws were expanded in Tennessee to include

³ Joe Coker, *Liquor in the Land of the Lost Cause*, 38, 45.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 47-48, 60.

areas with four miles of a private educational institution outside an incorporated town. In 1889, it was expanded to include all school houses. This largely eliminated saloons from rural areas. Lobbying by the Anti-Saloon League convinced the legislature to pass the Adams Bill in 1903 which restricted saloons in incorporated towns of less than five thousand residents. In 1907, the legislature passed the Pendleton Bill which would have banned saloons in larger cities if their government was re-chartered. Knoxville was the only city that voted to do that. The efforts of E. E. Folk, the Tennessee Anti-Saloon League, and other evangelical organizations helped make Nashville, Memphis, Chattanooga, and the mining town of LaFollette the only oases of legalized drinking in Tennessee. Evangelical forces inside and outside the cities sought to bring prohibition there as well. As long as alcohol was readily available in the cities, it would be readily available in the countryside as well.⁵

While temperance advocates gained strength in Tennessee, their influence was not readily seen in Nashville. Black Bottom and other African-American saloon areas saw regular raids but most downtown ones were largely left alone. This meant that for the first few years of the twentieth century, most activities were permitted in the Men's Quarter. In August 1901, the *Nashville American* noted that "Cherry Street along the 'tenderloin' is well nigh impassible for gamblers. Election money evidentially is finding its way into circulation. With a wide open town, wide open Sunday saloons and wide open gambling houses, .. gamblers have pleasant prospects of fat pickings undisturbed by even the thought that a policeman would raid their sacred precincts." In the memoir of Charles

⁵ Ibid., 65-67.

Johns, he wrote that as a Nashville patrolman, he was directly instructed not to enforce saloon laws.⁶

Restrictions on North Cherry Street saloons developed very suddenly in the early twentieth century. This shift in policy developed in response to a series of Nashville newspaper articles that specified which saloons were openly breaking the law. In a scathing editorial published during December 1902, The *Nashville American* accused the Southern Turf and Climax saloons of running illegal horse race betting operations. Furthermore, it charged that in a number of specific saloons, faro, poker “and other unlawful games for money are played daily.” However, its strongest charges were that the police department knowingly permitted illegal gambling and let saloons stay open on Sundays. As the *American* put it, “there is an understanding by which lawbreakers are not to be molested in their unlawful business.” In the wake of this editorial, more articles came out proclaiming the need to end the “lawless saloon.” In January 1903, the *American* wrote that if the state legislature would “turn its attention to the lawless city saloons and enact such legislation as will force them to obey the law or put them out of business, it will unquestionably receive the approval of the people of Tennessee. The lawless saloon must go.”⁷

Albert Williams won the election for mayor in May 1903 as the “law and order” candidate who had allied himself with prohibitionist forces. His victory was a key turning point for all of Nashville’s saloons because it marked the end of the open drinking scene.

⁶ “Editorial Article,” *Nashville American*, August 13, 1901, 4. Proquest (Document ID 952888762); Charles Johns, *Tennessee’s Pond of Liquor and Pool of Blood* (Nashville, TN: C. D. Johns & Company, 1912), 46.

⁷ “In Defiance of Law,” *Nashville American*, December 27, 1902, 4. Proquest (Document ID 952789884).

This meant that very quickly, saloons and gambling houses across Nashville were raided with increasing frequency. Establishments in the Men's Quarter were not excluded. One raid on the Southern Turf in December resulted in large numbers being arrested. "Some of the terror stricken men were heard to state that their jobs were gone, and others stated that they would never be caught in the place again." Because of a request by Southern Turf owner Ike Johnson, the men were to be hauled to the police station in open carriages. The lack of security in these vehicles led to a number of prisoners escaping including a member of the City Council.⁸ Such raids proved to very economically harmful to downtown saloons. Despite upgraded enforcement, some saloons still did run behind-the-scenes gambling operations. These would be frequently raided by police as long as saloons existed.

Politics in Nashville gradually shifted more and more in the favor of prohibitionists. In 1906, the city considered a proposal known as the "segregation bill" that would limit saloons to the downtown area and create what was a regulated vice district. This was one case of a national trend. During the 1890s and into the 1900s, municipal reformers known as the Mugwumps fought political battles to move disreputable leisure into downtown areas. It was thought that "without neighborhood saloons in which to meet the locals, or payoffs from brothels and gambling dens to finance their candidates," political machines would lose their stranglehold upon urban governments. Other reformers argued that "controlled toleration in designated areas would satisfy the demand for disreputable pleasure without reinforcing the negative

⁸ William Waller, *Nashville 1900 to 1910* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1972), 80-81; "Pool-Room at Southern Turf: Raid by Police Results in Twenty-Five Arrests," *Nashville American*, December 13, 1903, 1. Proquest (Document ID 924687127).

impact laissez-faire leisure had on urban neighborhoods.” For Nashvillians who proposed creating the vice district, the real goal was to clear saloons out of Black Bottom and similar neighborhoods. The *Nashville American* wondered if “the law will help to regenerate the Bottom” and make the neighborhood more pleasant to look upon. For prohibitionists such as Dr. Ira Landrith, it was the best measure they could get at the time. James Bradford, who represented the Gerst Brewery at a city council meeting, stated that closing Black Bottom saloons will only force the area’s residents into the downtown. He predicted that “you will see on Church street opposite churches a class of people you never saw there before.” To him, the “segregation bill” was also a direct insult toward all those who work in the alcohol industry. “I know saloon-keepers whom I respect. Some of them are bad, some indifferent and some good. You have got to discriminate, got to use judgment in dealing with this question.” With the passage of the bill, the number of saloons dramatically decreased. However, new establishments opened so that plenty of saloon choices remained between the foot of Broadway and the State Capitol.⁹

Even with the “segregation bill” passed liquor traffic and other undesirable trades were never completely eliminated from Black Bottom. Thus, city authorities considered the possibility of eliminating the entire neighborhood. “In 1907 the South Nashville Women’s Foundation ... lobbied for a city bond issue to underwrite a large park and a new bridge across the Cumberland, both intended to ‘eliminate Black Bottom.’” The

⁹ Mara Keire, *For Business and Pleasure: Red-Light Districts and the Regulation of Vice in the United States, 1890-1933* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 5,8; “Dry Wave Sweeps Over Suburbs,” *Nashville American*, June 30, 1907, 1. Proquest (Document ID 927236165); “Segregation Bill Discussed,” *Nashville American*, November 13, 1906, 2. Proquest (Document ID 940390564).

Sparkman Street bridge (now Shelby Street bridge) was built but a bond issue to develop a park was defeated in 1910.¹⁰

“The saloon has sinned away its day of grace in Tennessee. It will not be reformed and therefore must be destroyed.” These words by former US Senator Edward Carmack clearly signaled his stand on prohibition while running for Governor of Tennessee in 1908. Quickly, the Tennessee Anti-Saloon League and Women’s Christian Temperance Union enthusiastically endorsed him. After all, E. E. Folk noted that the race had become a question of “the church and the home and the school on one side and the distillery and brewery and saloon on the other.”¹¹

Carmack’s opponent in the Democratic primary was the incumbent, Malcolm Patterson. Patterson believed in having nothing more than local option votes for communities that desired to rid themselves of alcohol. The race between the two candidates was one of the most dramatic Nashville and Tennessee had ever seen. Fifty debates between Patterson and Carmack were held across the state of Tennessee in 1908. The central issue between the two was always prohibition. In late April, the two candidates visited the Ryman Auditorium for their Nashville debate. It was estimated that between 6,000 and 8,000 were in attendance inside the auditorium. Thousands more were denied entry into the auditorium. Shouting crowds in the auditorium launched counter demonstrations at each for nearly an hour before the candidates arrived. The open status of Nashville saloons was a prominent topic in the debate. Carmack said that it “was not a matter that concerned alone the people of Memphis and Nashville that they should be

¹⁰ Don Doyle, *Nashville in the New South*, 80.

¹¹ Paul Isaac, *Prohibition and Politics*, 138-140.

allowed to send out all over Tennessee soul-destroying drink to debauch and corrupt the manhood of the state.” Governor Patterson replied by proclaiming, “to drive whisky out of Nashville against the will of people would make hypocrites and cowards of men.”¹²

During the election of 1908, members of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union played a more prominent role than in any other time during their past. The local Nashville union, which had been founded in 1882, set aside the Friday before the primary election as a special day for prayer and fasting. “On election day, the union’s forces were fully mobilized” and working at the polls. Members of the WCTU from other states helped organize. In Memphis, a leader of the Texas WCTU came to help motivate Christian women. “She urged them to take an active role in Election Day activities, in defiance of their husbands, if necessary. Leaders of the WCTU planned to have women and children parade at polling places carrying banners and singing prohibition songs. Women were to be present at polling stations from when they opened to when they closed, praying, singing, and serving lunch to poll workers.”¹³

In their June 1908 primary election, Carmack received 79,000 votes to Patterson’s 85,000. E.E. Folk called the election a “perfect carnival of corruption.” At one precinct that had 52 registered Democratic voters, Patterson somehow received 207 votes. The *Christian Advocate* newspaper of Nashville actually placed some of the blame for Carmack’s defeat upon the WCTU. To the editor, “such is the distaste in the South for public speaking and political activity upon the part of women that in our opinion about as many votes would have been lost as won by such methods.” Despite the accusations of

¹² “Great Demonstration When Carmack States His Prohibition Views,” *Nashville Tennessean*, April 26, 1908. 1,3. Proquest (Document ID 902899349).

¹³ Joe Coker, *Liquor in the Land of the Lost Cause*, 204, 209.

corruption, Carmack accepted the results of the election. He then took over the job of editor at the *Nashville Tennessean* newspaper where he could mercilessly attack prohibition opponents.¹⁴

Some of Carmack's most frequent attacks as editor of the *Tennessean* were directed against Governor Patterson's chief strategist Duncan Cooper. On November 8th, Carmack again insulted Cooper by writing "all honor to that noble spirit, Major Duncan Brown Cooper, who wrought this happy union of congenial and confluxible spirits, separated by evil fates though born for each other."¹⁵

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 73, 210-211.

¹⁵ "Sixth Day," *Nashville American*, February 24, 1909, 9. Proquest (Document ID 940609929); Qtd in James Summerville, *Carmack-Cooper Shooting*, 10.



Figure 13. Front page of the *Nashville Tennessean* on November 10, 1908. Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

One day later, Carmack was dead and lying on the pavement of Seventh Avenue, only a few blocks from most of Nashville’s saloons. “Blood spread from the mouth, pooling” around the last shell that remained on the pavement. As rain began about half past six, the blood from his dead body washed down the street in rivulets. As noted in the introduction, Carmack died a martyr to the Prohibitionist cause. His stands during the 1908 campaign for Governor of Tennessee made him a hero to evangelicals. In eulogizing Carmack, E. E. Folk described him as a Christ figure “shot down like a dog by

the hands of men not worthy to touch the hem of his garments.” His death on November 9th created the political capital to pass prohibition in Tennessee.¹⁶

Prohibitionists proceeded to make the most out of the circumstances of Carmack’s death. His moral character and skill as an editor were emphasized in frequent tributes. Large crowds of mourners packed the train station in Nashville as his body left the city. Ladies from the Women’s Christian Temperance Union dropped flowers on the casket as it went by. Seven thousand people crowded the Ryman auditorium “to sing hymns, listen to addresses by leading prohibitionists, and solemnly resolve in Carmack’s memory” to drive liquor interests from Tennessee. Prohibitionists knew they had a powerful narrative to help advance their goals with the public and state legislature. Perhaps liquor interest understood this as well as it was reported by Methodist clergyman that they brought a carload of “beautiful fallen women” to Nashville to seduce legislators away from the prohibitionist cause.¹⁷

In the wake of the Carmack shooting, sentiment against saloons in Nashville reached a fevered pitch even against the wealthiest saloons. One article in the *Nashville Tennessean* declared Men’s Quarter saloons to be even more “demoralizing and diabolical than the lowest dives.” Using words from the *Wine and Sprit Gazette*, the article noted that wealthy saloons seek being called good for two reasons. First of all, the saloons want to use cleanliness and order to make themselves seem respectable. Secondly, they want to “kill off the places which are run economically and which are chiefly independent saloons and replace them by places with fine bars and expensive

¹⁶ James Summerville, *Carmack-Cooper Shooting*, 18; Joe Coker, *Liquor in the Land of the Lost Cause*, 74.

¹⁷ Paul Isaac, *Prohibition and Politics*, 159-164.

furnishings, which the brewers themselves often furnish at enormous profit.” Before this period, it was rare to find such a direct assault upon the wealthiest saloons. Past articles directing their ire against Cherry Street mostly focused their concerns upon issues such as illegal gambling.¹⁸

In January, the Holloday Bill passed both houses of the Tennessee legislature with significant margins of victory. It called for the closure of all saloons within four miles of a school. The bill’s passage was greeted by the women in the House gallery singing the “Doxology.” Unfortunately for prohibitionists, the Holloday Bill did not immediately end the saloon era in Nashville or other Tennessee cities. The famous saloons like The Southern Turf did at least temporarily close on July 1, 1909, when the bill came into force. However, most drinking establishments quickly reopened. Some saloons converted into soft-drink stands where liquor was openly sold while others operated as private clubs. These saloons stayed open for several years with only the occasional interruption of business due to law enforcement.¹⁹

¹⁸ “All Saloons Bad,” *Nashville Tennessean*, November 21, 1908, 4. Proquest (Document ID 904671324).

¹⁹ Paul Isaac, *Prohibition and Politics*, 163-165.

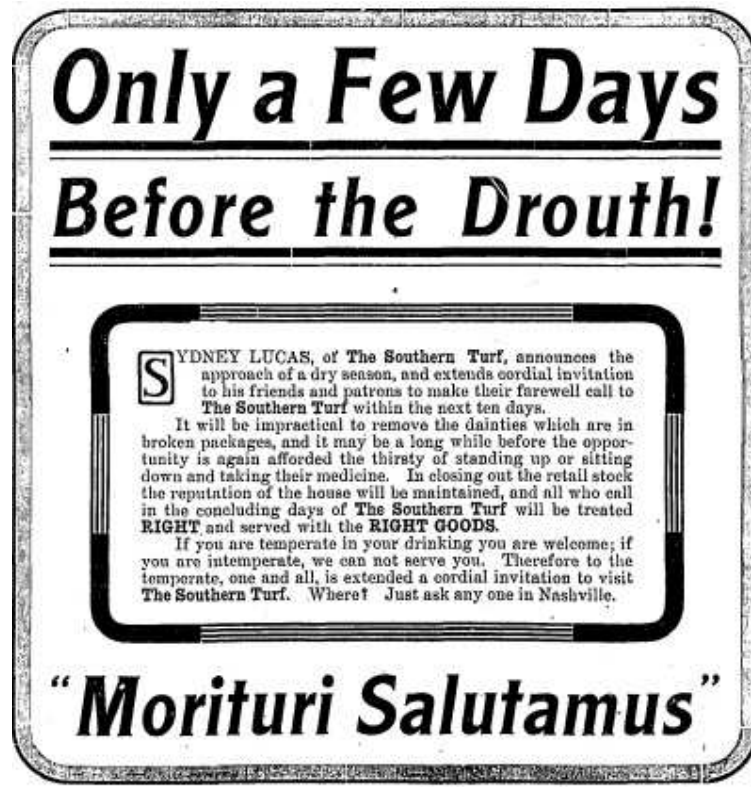


Figure 14. Southern Turf Saloon ad in the *Nashville American* during June 1909. This was from just days before the statewide prohibition law was to take effect. Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

Nashville historian Don Doyle noted: “the moral reformers, by carrying prohibition into the city, had finally created the conditions necessary to sustain a political machine organized to protect its constituents from enforcement. At the head of this political organization was Hilary Howse,” the man who became Nashville mayor in 1909. Howse was very much the peer of the more famous mayor E. H. Crump of Memphis. That city’s newspaper, the *Commercial Appeal*, said of Howse that he “is unlettered, uncouth and contact with men of culture does not improve him. His language is appropriate to the stock yard district. ... It will not do to say that his support came from

the bad and the ignorant unless a majority of the people of Nashville are vicious.” In the general election, Howse won 64 percent of the vote and 21 out of 25 wards of the city.²⁰

Howse’s opinion toward drinking was made clear in a number of statements. In one, he claimed, “I am not a drinking man, but as long as I stay in a free country I will eat and drink as I please.” When asked about his support of Fourth Avenue saloons, Howse once said “protect em? I do better than that. I patronize them!” Through much of his administration, he let Nashville’s saloons continue operation without large-scale interference. He justified this under the belief that “the great majority of Nashville opposed” prohibition laws. Occasionally city police and county sheriff deputies made arrests but grand juries usually refused to indict the liquor violators.²¹

To manage his political machine, Howse heavily employed people in the liquor industry such as saloon owner Sol Cohn. However, he also reached out to the poor, black, and white. Howse “extended new government welfare services to his people, dispensed charity and small favors with buckets of coal or boxes of groceries.” Then he mobilized those people on Election Day when they could voice their gratitude with their votes. Howse was a social reformer who believed in an expanded government to meet the needs of the people but that should also be kept in check “when it interfered in the people’s private behavior.” In poor neighborhoods of Nashville, he sponsored four free health dispensaries and several milk stations. Howse promoted a major addition to the city’s hospital along with the construction of a new high school (now known as Hume-Fogg School). For the African-American community, Howse promoted the establishment of a

²⁰ Paul Isaac, *Prohibition and Politics*, 177; Don Doyle, *Nashville in the New South*, 165-7.

²¹ Don Doyle, *Nashville in the New South*, 167.

county hospital to treat tuberculosis, “the Carnegie Branch Library for Negroes in North Nashville, Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial Normal School for Negroes (later Tennessee State University), and Hadley Park, the first public park for” African-Americans in any American city.²²



Figure 15. Hilary Howse (1866-1938), Mayor of Nashville 1909-15, 1923-38.

Howse’s actions to court African-American voters heavily succeeded. During the 1911 election, 42 percent of Howse’s vote total came from them. That year, the Howse machine also helped elect the first African-American city councilmen in nearly thirty years. “Opponents of the machine complained about police dragging black voters from saloons to register them or take them to the polls.” Reports in Nashville newspapers suggested buying votes and other irregularities occurred as a result of the Howse

²² Ibid., 168-171.

machine. One article even reported that Sol Cohn, a saloon owner and Howse supporter, ended up in the position of counting votes after the 1911 election.²³

People opposing Howse's saloon policies seemed to have focused their criticism on his handling of the Sparkman Palm Room. That particular saloon was a target because of it being next door to the new high school Howse had constructed. One newspaper editorial stated "Sparkman's and the high school are so close together that the mayor took credit for the latter when he should have only taken credit for the former." Howse said of the saloon, "I believe that the man who operates the palm garden beside the new high school structure will remove it when the structure is completed, and if I am elected and he won't do so without it, I'll ask him to." Bowing to political pressure, Howse narrowed the area in which saloons were allowed to operate in Nashville around the end of 1911 and did not include Sparkman's place in that district. When asked before the deadline if the place was going to follow orders by closing, Palm Room employees said that was not the plan of their boss. "A woman habitu e of the place was asked her opinion. . . . She said, between drinks of what looked like straight whisky, and puffs at a cigarette; 'Bu-lieve me, kid; they are not going to close this joint up. Take it from me, Sparkman's palm room will be open for business Monday and every other week day.'" ²⁴

Months later, Sparkman's saloon was still open. Howse had given its owner time to find a new location and for doing this, he received much ridicule. Stories reporting Sparkman's saloon as still being open were a regular fixture of the Nashville newspapers

²³ Ibid., 171-172; For more on Sol Cohn, see chapter three.

²⁴ "The Mayor Again Takes Credit," *Nashville Tennessean and the Nashville American*, October 5, 1911, 6. Proquest (Document ID 904696293); Paul Isaac, *Prohibition and Politics*, 175; "Will Sparkman Fight the Segregation Law," *Nashville Tennessean and the Nashville American*, December 31, 1911, 1. Proquest (Document ID 904734088).

in 1912. One noted “closing as practiced by Sparkman should ardently be wished for by every saloon keeper of Nashville, for not only was the business more brisk, more drunks on hand, but women of the red light district were in greater evidence at the palm room Monday than in many days previous.” Conspicuous among visitors to the saloon that night “were two police officers in uniform, who were engaged in an apparently highly hilarious conversation with women.” Shortly after the academic year started at the high school, the saloon was finally shut down. This was over a year after it had become a political issue.²⁵

As a result of all his activities, Howse was despised by many Tennessee prohibition activists. To them, he was guilty of multiple sins including keeping saloons open, financially supporting African-Americans, and encouraging African-Americans to be part of the political process.

State authorities had little recourse to challenge the pro-saloon policies of Hilary Howse and other Tennessee mayors. For a short time, declaring martial law and using the Tennessee militia to enforce prohibition was considered by Governor Ben Hooper. This move was inspired by a Kentucky Supreme Court decision that gave this same authority to its state’s governor. As a matter of normal procedure, the decision was circulated to officials in states across the South and then down to officers of the Tennessee State Guard. “Despite this fact, rumors of ‘grim-visaged war’ became rife, and the visionary pictured the tramp of armed troops in the streets of Nashville. ... Volunteers rushed forward and offered to guard the fashionable eating resorts where fair women congregate

²⁵ “Closed for Good, Sparkman’s Palm Room Flourishes,” *Nashville Tennessean and the Nashville American*, September 3, 1912, 1. Proquest (Document ID 904758167).

in large numbers, and where viands are said to pour profusely.” Governor Hooper was forced to quell this enthusiasm by stating it was the Attorney General’s opinion the militia could be only be called out for war and rebellion.²⁶

Laws passed in the Tennessee legislature after the inauguration of Governor Thomas Rye in 1915 led toward the end of saloons in Nashville and of the rule of Mayor Hilary Howse. A series of bills prohibited soft drink stands and private clubs from distributing beverages with more than one-half of one percent alcohol. Another bill heavily restricted the ability of drug stores to sell alcohol. More important for Nashville was the passed “ouster law” that provided for the removal of “state, county, or municipal officials who neglected their duties, were intoxicated in a public place, engaged in gambling of any kind, or violated penal statute involving moral turpitude.” The law was specifically designed to remove Mayor Howse and Mayor Crump of Memphis. “Ouster proceedings could be instituted by the state attorney general, a district attorney, any ten citizen freeholders, or the governor.” Cases were to be heard in front of a judge and without a jury. “Witnesses were not to be excused on the ground that testimony might incriminate them.”²⁷

Fearing his removal by state officials, Howse had Nashville police begin arresting liquor sellers and closing their places in 1915. Despite leading one raid himself, Howse still faced an ouster trial. On the stand, “ex-saloonkeepers testified that they had received protection from the city police in exchange for contributions to Howse’s ‘campaign’ fund.” Howse denied receiving money from liquor dealers but freely admitted

²⁶ “Cannot call out State Militia to Close Saloons,” *Nashville Tennessean and the Nashville American*, January 7, 1912, 2. Proquest (Document ID 905728371).

²⁷ Paul Isaac, *Prohibition and Politics*, 174, 241-242.

that he had not interfered with liquor sales. The mayor was eventually removed from office as the circuit court judge trying the case felt Howse had no respect for the law. The result of Howse's removal was open saloons in Nashville were no longer tolerated. By April 1916, the state pure food and drug inspector reported that the open sale of liquor in Nashville had been entirely suppressed. While much of the Tennessee had been dry since the beginning of the twentieth century, this was effectively the beginning of prohibition in Nashville.²⁸

“Let us eat, drink, and be merry; for tomorrow we die,” was the motto of Ike Johnson, owner of Nashville's most popular saloon, The Southern Turf. Perhaps because saloons were no more, he committed suicide in February 1916. Newspaper reporting of his death treated him as a charitable person, showcasing how wealthy saloon owners still faced better coverage than those catering to African Americans.²⁹

According to William Majors' biography of Edward Carmack, the effect of events in the prohibition movement in Nashville and Tennessee was to stall progressive reforms. This was because Carmack, the most prominent Tennessee progressive politician, was effectively a conservative. The only issues he sided with progressives on were black disenfranchisement and prohibition. “He, more than any single individual, made the whisky issue the sum of progressivism in Tennessee.” In this climate, genuine reform efforts by prohibition opponents like Hillary Howse only held back results on a state level. While some modest reform was achieved in a few areas on a state level, changes to

²⁸ Ibid., 243, 247.

²⁹ William Waller, *Nashville in the 1890s*, 141; “Ike Johnson Fires Bullet into Brain at Southern Turf,” *Nashville Tennessean and the Nashville American*, February 4, 1916, 8. Proquest (Document ID 905729145).

education, for example, did not happen. Election reform was ignored for many years until it was addressed by the Austin Peay administration in 1923. “Business regulation was debated, but it was not until 1919 that the power and jurisdiction of the Railroad Commission was significantly increased.”³⁰

By no means did Nashville even have the most saloons in Tennessee or the highest crime rates related to drinking alcohol. Despite this, the struggle to shut down saloons in Nashville was noteworthy because of powerful forces based in the city that were both for and against prohibition. Saloons in Nashville were often defended by powerful politicians, and residents on grand juries often resisted indicting liquor law offenders. Yet, Nashville was home to many of the religious opponents of the saloon. The main Southern Baptist newspaper, the *Baptist and Reflector*, was published in the city. Nashville saloons were featured in its pages and served as props for other groups showcasing the dangers of alcohol. Compared to more studied cities like Memphis and New Orleans, Nashville prohibition political fights were more balanced between proponents and opponents. Yet as the background behind Edward Carmack’s death illustrates, they were eventful. Still, the relatively balanced fights between supporters and opponents of prohibition in Nashville is what the majority of major Southern cities faced.

³⁰ William Majors, *Editorial Wild Oats: Edward Ward Carmack and Tennessee Politics* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), 166-167.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

By the early 1900s, a major entertainment divide existed between rural and urban Tennessee. Saloons and all other forms of drinking establishments had been limited to the largest cities and the town of LaFollette.¹ In the case of Nashville, local residents and Middle Tennessee visitors to the city had the choice of either wealthy or working class saloons. Wealthier establishments were often the resort of professional gamblers and were frequently connected to other businesses. Most of these saloons were located in a block of Fourth Avenue North that later became known as the “Men’s Quarter.” Working class saloons catered to African Americans and poor whites. These places were located in industrial zones and slum areas and faced the most frequent police raids.

Among the many saloon keepers that catered to Nashville African Americans, Sol Cohn was arguably the most famous during the early twentieth century. Through business skill and many violations of state and municipal laws, he built a highly successful alcohol selling business. As prohibition became a real possibility in Tennessee, Cohn became highly involved in politics and gained notoriety as a result. Newspaper coverage of Cohn’s violent actions and election tampering helped make him the personification of an evil dive keeper for prohibition activists.

Once Tennessee prohibition supporters had forced saloons from the countryside, Nashville and other city saloons became bigger targets. In that environment Nashville saloons became hubs of violence and some of the greatest sources of alcohol for the region. Tennessee evangelicals supported the election of former US Senator Edward

¹ In Kentucky, Georgia, and other Southern states, similar divides existed. Saloons were restricted to urban areas very early.

Carmack as governor in 1908 as a way to rid the state of saloons. His defeat and death in a duel with a prohibition supporter helped prohibition pass in Tennessee. Still, Mayor Hilary Howse and his allies in Nashville resisted alcohol law enforcement. In that case, the growing divide between urban and rural areas over alcohol motivated state leaders to take radical action. Legislation was passed that allowed the state government to remove leaders who did not enforce laws. Howse was removed from office as a result and, following this, most remaining saloons closed.

The story of the saloon in the Urban South has rarely been told by either popular or professional histories. Nashville serves as a relevant saloon landscape to study because it shared many commonalities with other important Southern cities. The great significance of Nashville's saloon story is how it inspired prohibition action in other regions of the country. In a 2003 issue of *The Journal of Southern History*, Ann-Marie Szymanski argued that the methods of the prohibition movement in Southern states had a large influence upon the North. Michigan Anti-Saloon League activist Marshall L. Cook wrote to a friend in Tennessee, "[T]he experiments that are now being tried in the South to deal with the liquor traffic without gloves will be watched with a great deal of interest." Local option's success in Tennessee and the rest of the South led Northern states to either adopt similar laws or reenergize campaigns to enforce them. The example of Nashville helped show that local option laws could eventually bring prohibition to the cities.²

² Ann-Marie Szymanski, "Beyond Parochialism: Southern Progressivism, Prohibition, and State-Building," *The Journal of Southern History* 69 (2003): 128-129.

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