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## IN THE POLICE COURT.

(BEFORE JUDGE PROWSE.)

THE gas jet had to be lighted this morning in the court room owing to the dullness of the day; however, business was brisk. The first on the docket was Fanny Baker, 36, single, no home. Fanny has appeared in court more than one hundred times for the same offence. Dr. Bunting was sent to visit her in the police station, as Miss Baker is ailing from a heavy cold. The doctor pronounced her unfit for the Penitentiary. and at noon

### She Was Conveyed

to the General Hospital. Nicholas Connors, police constable, summoned Michael Cahill for loose and disorderly conduct

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Madeleine Mant and Johanna Cole //

The recent conservation and digitization of prison admission records from Her Majesty's Penitentiary (HMP) and its predecessor, the courthouse jail, have made available a rich dataset for historical, sociological, and anthropological research regarding crime and punishment in the long 19<sup>th</sup> century in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador. Our research concerns evidence of historic prostitution in St. John's, a previously understudied topic in this key port city. It is important to note that this work employs the term *prostitution* when describing the historical evidence, as it was the term used during the period under study and outlined in the 1824 Vagrancy Act (5 Geo. IV, c. 83), whereas we employ the term *sex work* when discussing the contemporary sex trade. Extant prison admission records from 1838-1911 indicate the name, age, religion, reason for imprisonment, and physical descriptions of individuals arrested, allowing for targeted investigations of certain offenses or inmate profiles. The HMP archival collection also includes a medical diary kept by Dr. Charles Crowdy and, following his retirement, Dr. Henry Shea, resident physicians of the St. John's General Hospital, in which they note the number of prisoners requiring or seeking medical treatment. This resource, when considered alongside contemporary patient admission and discharge records of the St. John's General Hospital, reveal intimate details of these individuals' institutional interactions (Mant, 2020).

We recognize the relationship between memory and power inherent in the available sources — newspaper articles, Colonial Office papers, and institutional records — which were created and curated mainly by powerful men. There are inherent limitations in such sources, which were not intended to highlight individual experiences or necessarily record the voices of the women themselves as they negotiated their available economy of makeshifts (Hufton, 1975; Henderson, 1999). Despite these clear limitations, these archives have allowed for our work — the first targeted examination of the sex trade in 19<sup>th</sup>-century St. John's — to uncover and highlight the experiences of women in this port city and to join the conversation of feminist scholarship regarding historic

prostitution (e.g., Hershatter, 1997; Laite, 2012; Poutanen, 2015; Rosen, 1982; Walkowitz, 1980). The work is difficult, uncomfortable, and often emotional, as the experience of poor women is sometimes purposely elided, sometimes passively ignored, and, in the most egregious cases, exploited for “*spicy reading*” by the local media (*Evening Herald*, August 30, 1890, 4; emphasis in original). While always keeping in mind the biases of the sources, our research seeks to uncover the experiences of women engaging in the historic sex trade, with a particular focus upon their health.

Drawing together the HMP admission registers, St. John’s General Hospital records, jail physicians’ notes, and the local newspapers, individual stories of negotiation and resilience are possible to be uncovered as each source aids in understanding the context of the next. One such example is that of Fanny Baker, a woman who was arrested 21 times between 1888 and 1892: 12 times for “Prostitution” and nine for “Vagrancy.” Fanny had hazel eyes, black hair, and stood between 5’4” and 5’7”. Her complexion is described as “Fresh” during her 1888 arrest but had faded to “Sallow” by 1892. When asked by the jailkeepers at HMP, she indicates that she is literate. Fanny appears in the St. John’s General Hospital records being treated initially for venereal disease, later for influenza, and finally due to exposure while she struggles with homelessness. The St. John’s newspapers showed no restraint when reporting upon the comings and goings of “notorious” individuals like Fanny (*Evening Herald*, September 22, 1896, 4); she appears in the papers 20 times between 1889 and 1900, including details of a suicide attempt in 1895:

*Yesterday afternoon an unfortunate named Fanny Baker, who was only released from prison in the morning, was again conveyed to the police station on a charge of vagrancy. Early this morning, while the matron, Mrs. Walsh, who was in charge of her, left the cell. Fanny attempted to commit suicide. She tried to choke herself with her garter, and was Black in the Face when Mrs. Walsh again entered the cell. She afterwards stated that it was just as well for them to let her kill herself now, as she would certainly do it in the Penitentiary. She was given thirty days in jail by Judge Conroy this morning (*Evening Herald*, June 11, 1895, 4).*

In an article titled “FANNY BAKER AGAIN,” local women found “the lifeless body of a woman lying face downwards in the bushes.” The article continues:

*The poor creature according to her own story had not eaten a morsel of food since her liberation from the penitentiary Saturday. She was in an awful state from Hunger and Exposure to the chill air of Sunday night, her face which was badly swollen, being purpled from cold, while so weak was she that she had to be carried to Linegar’s house where warm drinks were given her, though she couldn’t eat (*The St. John’s Enterprise*, September 15, 1897, 7).*

Almost two years later, Fanny appears again, having only days before been released from HMP:

*DYING NEAR THE ROPEWALK — The unfortunate woman Fanny Baker, who is only three days out of the Penitentiary, was found this morning lying down on a pile of stones in the vicinity of the Ropewalk. She was in a pitiable condition and is not expected to live. Constables*

*Bennett and Newhook were told of it by the Sanitary man and they repaired to the place, procured a horse and waggon and brought her to the police station. Bennett hurried quickly for Dr. Bunting and the unfortunate woman was taken to the hospital (Evening Telegram, June 17, 1899, 4).*

Many of Fanny's health issues were directly related to her struggle to obtain and maintain a place to live. She spent 24 days in hospital in September of 1897 with a diagnosis of "no home." In 1896 the *Evening Telegram* states that she "spends so much of time in the penitentiary that she now considers it her home" (*Evening Telegram*, January 15, 1896, 4).

Fanny's last newspaper appearance occurs in May of 1900, describing her as being single, with no home, and being sent to the prison once again (*Evening Telegram*, May 3, 1900, 4.). Later that year, on 17 August, a death record surfaces for a Fanny Baker who died of heart disease at the General Hospital (Newfoundland Vital Records, 1849-1949).

Fanny Baker's institutional recidivism must be considered in the context of the poor relief legislation of Newfoundland, which failed to protect the most destitute. Her use of the penitentiary and hospital as a stop-gap measure for housing shines a light on the difficult heritage of failed social services. Despite representative government being established in Newfoundland in 1832 and the English Poor Law reform in 1834, poor relief remained inconsistently administered. In fact, English Poor Law was never formalized in Newfoundland, which led to a reliance on patchwork efforts by local charitable societies and case-by-case kindness of certain administrations (Godfrey, 1985). Seasonal employment in Newfoundland meant that "resident fishermen habitually found themselves idle and destitute for seven months out of twelve, a situation which gave the colony 'a larger proportion of poor than in other British settlements'" (Fingard 1974, 33). The attorney general estimated in 1856 that "St. John's had more widows and orphans 'than in any other city or town of the same size'" due to disease, loss of husbands and fathers in shipwrecks, and the grinding, chronic poverty caused by the "rhythm of summer fishing followed by winter distress (Attorney General Little, qtd. in Fingard, 1975, 50, 49)."

Fanny and other women in her situation faced extremely limited job prospects, geographic isolation, and had little in the way of social safety to fall back on. Privileging and highlighting stories of individuals living on the margins should be a priority for researchers analyzing institutional records, particularly those involving the counting, categorizing, and containing of bodies. Women in St. John's faced a particular constellation of challenges and through a compassionate and targeted reading of institutional records their stories of struggle can be brought more clearly to light.

**This piece is adapted from the upcoming article: Cole, J., & Mant, M. (2022). "[S]pectacles of [D]egeneracy": Unpacking Evidence for Historical Sex Work in St. John's Newfoundland, *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*, 36(2).**

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