

Women in Cairo, Illinois during the U.S. Civil War

Before the Civil War, promoters of the city of Cairo, Illinois had extolled its location on the tongue of marshy land at the spot where the clear waters of the Ohio River joined the slog of the Mississippi. Though the vision of becoming the next proud Chicago, or a prairie version of New York situated at “the confluence of two mighty rivers” never came to pass, Cairo did become a key depot for troops and materiel in the western theater of the war, even though no battles were fought here. It assumed an important – though unwanted – role as one of the nation’s largest “contraband camps,” essentially a massive gathering point for enslaved people liberated by the Union Army during the 1862 campaigns of Ulysses S. Grant’s Army of the Tennessee. As a consequence, some of the key themes of 19th century women’s history can be seen developing here.¹

This paper will argue that Cairo’s role as a contraband camp became troublesome for many local citizens not just because of the Southern and even pro-slavery sympathies that pervaded the city before the outbreak of the Civil War, but also because the spectacle of so many hungry refugees, wounded soldiers, female migrants and the logistical difficulties involved in caring for them stood in stark contrast to the glittering pictures of Cairo that most local white citizens had internalized from the blizzard of publicity that surrounded its founding. In such a chaotic wartime milieu, the women of Cairo found work in education, nursing and in the underground trade of prostitution that flourished here in the 1860s. Many of the women who defined Cairo in these ways were recent migrants to the city, not natives, and they came with different sets of challenges and purposes. Most of them also sided with the Union in a city whose sympathies generally lay with the slaveholding South

The women came into a something of a tragic geography, and the original tragedy of Cairo lay rooted in its physical setting at the strategic confluence at the southern tip of Illinois. In 1837, an entrepreneur named Darius Holbrook founded the Cairo City and Canal Company from his office in Boston. He printed up four-color posters depicting chuffing smokestacks and proud clock towers amid what he called *the World's Greatest Manufacturing Mart and Emporium*. These were plastered on the bulkheads of steamships bound for Europe and tacked to pub walls in London's financial district.

This kind of hype was fairly typical of American booster rhetoric but its unusual reach into British financial circles, plus a favorable report from a team of architects, was enough to secure Holbrook a \$1.25 million credit line to put up a set of earthen levees. Holbrook also obtained a charter that gave him dictatorial powers. He convinced the New York Life Insurance and Trust Company to securitize his bonds with proceeds from lot sales in what his prospectus claimed would be “one of the most important commercial cities of the Union,” connected to overstated reserves of timber and coal with railroads that did not yet exist. Swarms of Irish roughnecks began shoveled together protective berms in the shape of an irregular downtown square.²

But the timing was all wrong. A series of levee-busting floods combined with a market depression in the summer of 1837 left bankers stiffed. Cairo's new wharves charged predatory docking fees, giving the spot a no-go reputation among rivermen. One of the first permanent residents, John Lansden, reflected that “lavish expenditures of money” no matter how irrational creates a magnetic effect in the minds of deluded investors, thinking they have sunk their fortunes into an enterprise of “great merit and promise.”³

The word “Cairo” became a cautionary joke among British bankers. The story reached the ears of the novelist Charles Dickens, who asked to see the site of the debacle during his lecture tour of the United States at the height of his popularity. On April 5, 1842, he gazed upon its levees and rooftops with disapproval from the upper-deck railing of the river steamer *Pike*. In his published travelogue about the trip, *American Notes*, Dickens uncorked on Cairo in a lurid paragraph as withering as Holbrook’s advertisements had been effusive.

At the junction of the two rivers, on ground so flat and low and marshy, that at certain seasons of the year it is inundated to the house-tops, lies a breeding-place of fever, ague, and death; vaunted in England as a mine of Golden Hope, and speculated in, on the faith of monstrous representations, to many people’s ruin. A dismal swamp, on which the half-built houses rot away: cleared here and there for the space of a few yards; and teeming, then, with rank unwholesome vegetation, in whose baleful shade the wretched wanderers who are tempted hither, droop, and die, and lay their bones; the hateful Mississippi circling and eddying before it, and turning off upon its southern course a slimy monster hideous to behold; a hotbed of disease, an ugly sepulchre, a grave uncheered by any gleam of promise: a place without one single quality, in earth or air or water, to commend it: such is this dismal Cairo.⁴

Dickens wasn’t yet through with Cairo. His late satiric novel *Martin Chuzzlewit* tells the story of a young architect’s apprentice who makes the mistake of listening to New York promoters talk up a can’t-miss investment opportunity in the wilderness called Eden, a “thriving city” at the junction of two rivers that is clearly modeled on Cairo. When a hopeful Martin arrives by riverboat to survey the prospect, he finds instead the “monotonous desolation” of sun blazing down on river water and the “festering elements of corruption and disease” in a swampy village where people wandered the streets like cheated ghosts. Martin languishes in a filthy cabin and falls on the ground on his second night, weeping in frustration. The promised Eden is a kind of hell.

Martin Chuzzlewit did not sell well and American critics were upset with what they considered a cheap-shot parody of their country. Dickens apologized twenty years later for the portrayal but he inaugurated a minor literary tradition, of sorts, of distinguished authors writing

unflattering things about Cairo in their travelogues, even though it was no longer a paper city but a real one. The confluence geography, genuinely impressive, paid off in 1854 when the Illinois Central railroad built a causeway over marshy terrain to reach it, sparking a job-creation bonanza. Midwestern producers shipping cargo to the slave states had to have their boxcars emptied at the Cairo yards and the goods broken down and packed onto steamships heading downriver, providing steady jobs to Irish and German stevedores and creating a vibrant market for liquor, prostitutes, rooming houses and fenced booty. Visitors who chanced a drink in Stewart's Arcade, Sunflower Billiard Hall, Uncle Joe's Place, Rising Sun or any of the unlicensed "doggeries" in private homes serving up drinks to thirsty rivermen risked getting knifed or robbed – a frequent local pastime.⁵

The scene also did nothing to impress Ralph Waldo Emerson when he passed through in 1850, unable to find a place worth staying except for a beached steamboat with its engine removed. Though "the biggest city of the world was to be here," he wrote, all the empty houses were now "wide open to every pedlar & boatman to enter & take possession, if he will." Herman Melville, following suit, depicted Cairo as a "swampy and squalid domain" perched on a "villainous bank" in his novel *The Confidence Man*, as a reluctant visitor from Missouri named Pitch wonders whether nature is good or indifferent.

The experienced river navigator Mark Twain thought so little of Cairo that he has the title character of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* speculate to Jim that such an important metropolis must have at least a few of its houses lighted up, but then the two drift by it on their raft without even seeing it in the darkness. "So it was all up with Cairo," Huck shrugged.

Most Illinois Republicans felt the same way, writing off the downstate region everyone called Little Egypt as a hopeless hotbed of pro-slavery sentiment. Its residents claimed the exotic

name had been coined after an early frost in the winter of 1831 inspired farmers to buy more seed and corn than usual. One of the well-lettered pious among them compared the buying rush to Jacob's children fleeing to southern Egypt. The pronunciation CARE-oh applied to its principal city enhanced the conservative rural image.

But there were less-flattering reasons why people used the nickname "Little Egypt." Illinois was chartered as a free state but it had enforced a Black Code to discourage free people of color from settling here, and the pro-slavery sentiment ran strongest down where the rivers joined. It was geographically and politically closer to Mississippi than it was to Chicago, further south in latitude than Richmond. And the Biblical Egypt, as every churchgoer knew, was the land of enslavement.

Though the confluence of rivers at the northern boundary of slave country made it a natural jumping-off point for those bold enough to stow away on steamships or swim across from Kentucky or Missouri, underground railroad conductors warned refugees to get away from Cairo as fast as they could. "There are no abolitionists here, tho' this is a free state – the climate doesn't agree with them," said the *Cairo City Times* whose pages contained frequent advertisements for bounties on returned slaves. Or as the rival *Gazette* put it, there was a "a wide difference between the wants, the habits, the manner of life and the modes of thought" between Egypt and the rest of Illinois. During the wave of secession that followed Lincoln's election, many in Cairo demanded an application to join the Confederacy, reasoning along with the *Gazette*'s editor that "the sympathies of our people are mainly with the South." Just seven free Blacks dared live here.⁶

Speculation ran high that the Confederate Navy was going to seize it as a pressure point. "Shall Cairo be taken?" asked the *Memphis Bulletin* on June 20, 1861. Whispers spread of a

coordinated attack helped by the unemployed dock rowdies who spent their days in the “innumerable drinking saloons on the levee and hurrah for Jeff. Davis.” The loudest among them were members of the Knights of the Golden Circle, a semi-secret society dedicated to spreading slavery worldwide. At the first sound of cannons, they were to put down their drinks and go wreck the railroad tracks. The *Louisville Journal* warned this plot was “known to thousands.”⁷

An alarmed Illinois Governor Richard Yates ordered several companies of volunteer infantry to board trains in Chicago, encamp on a field south of the St. Charles Hotel and put up five artillery guns aimed at the V where the rivers met. More than six thousand greenhorn troops streamed into Cairo, a “vast moving sea of Union men, and the thousands of bristling bayonets glistening above them,” in the words of the *Cairo City Gazette*. The stars and stripes flew floated over the St. Charles, the tallest building in town.

Talk of a rebel invasion faded. The occupation of Cairo was accomplished without a shot fired. Now the U.S. government had secured a key portal into the Southern river system, as well as a depot to supply General Ulysses S. Grant’s upcoming invasion of Mississippi River towns. Throughout the heaviest part of the fighting, young men would stream through Cairo on their way, unknowingly, to meet a rebel bullet at Shiloh or Vicksburg. As they liberated plantations, they sent many of the freedpeople upriver to live temporarily at the edge of Cairo.⁸

The U.S. Army reserved a row of its rickety barracks on the west side to house them on ground described as “low, wet & unpleasant,” a ten-minute walk from downtown. But this was still too close for many local doughfaces who “did not want the black as a voter, officeholder, or citizen – they just plain did not want him,” according to a local editor. That many of them were children, and that nearly all were suffering, did not seem to matter. They complained about federal spending on “feeding vagabond negroes” and the “generally very worthless class of

population” living in squalor among them, turning a blind eye to the Kentucky bounty hunters prowling the streets. In the meantime, the city became one large rehabilitation compound for sick and wounded Union soldiers brought by steamship northward from the fields of battle.⁹

Here lay the greatest avenue for women’s influence. Shortly after the federal takeover of Cairo, General Lew Wallace sent a message requesting help to The Sisters of the Holy Cross of Notre Dame, Indiana led by Mother Angela Gillespie. She and five religious sisters took up the call immediately and helped set up a hospital in some empty warehouses at Mound City, six miles north of Cairo. “The fact that the sisters would expect but simple fare, endure hardship, and not complain about the food or the accommodations made them most desirable by the army medical staff,” wrote scholar Cindy Intravartolo. “Another plus was that they had no romantic interest in the soldiers and did not waste time consorting with the soldiers.” They had their hands full: after the siege of Fort Donelson, the hospital overflowed with 1,400 wounded Union Army men.¹⁰

The call went out in December for the Sisters of the Holy Cross to operate in a hospital closer to Cairo, where they found a horrific scene: “amputated arms and legs and pieces of human flesh were strewn around, while here and there a mound of decaying flesh and bones sent forth a sickening odor throughout the entire hospital,” wrote historian Ellen Ryan Jolly. “To add to the horrors of the gruesome sight, the walls and even the window-panes were blood-spattered.” The nun in charge, Mother Augusta, responded to the obvious distress of her colleagues by saying: “now stop, you are here and must put your heart and Soul to work. Pin up your habits, we will get three brooms, three buckets of water and we will first begin by washing the walls and then the floors.” They changed the name of the hospital from “The Bulletin” to St. John’s.¹¹

The sisters were aided by a Protestant mission led by Mary Bickerdyke of Galesburg, an experienced and no-nonsense nurse on a commission from Brick Congregational Church. In Cairo, she met with Mary Safford, a young woman described as small, frail, refined, retiring, beautiful, and sweetly romantic.” She spoon-fed soldiers to sick to feed themselves, wrote letters for them, brought them baked apples and read to them from the Bible. Said one of them: “She was everywhere, doing everything, straightening out affairs, soothing and comforting, and sometimes praying, dressing wounds, cooking and nursing, and keeping the laggards at work. For herself she seemed to live on air.... I do not wonder that all the boys called her ‘the Cairo angel!’ She was the only one that seemed to know what to do on that boat.”¹²

She and Bickerdyke not only had to face army regulations initially hostile to females serving as nurses, but also the resentment of some in Cairo that their city had become a giant encampment of wounded soldiers and those recently freed from slavery. A good deal of anti-Catholic prejudice was also aimed at the Sisters of the Holy Cross. All of the suspicion of outsiders was in spite of the prosperity that had finally come to the snakebitten wharf city, unexpectedly, in the form of contracts with the Quartermaster’s Department located on the Ohio levee. Nearly six hundred tons of supplies passed through here each day. The premium on Cairo housing was so great that people took to living on rows of packet ships and flatboats clinging to the banks of both rivers, a floating village unto itself. Those who secured berths on the cramped vessels counted themselves as lucky. The only other dry place to sleep was in a tent on top of a levee, which became a prime spot to watch the dramatic thundershowers that came boiling up from the two river valleys.¹³

Overcharging and graft ran rampant on the docks; War Department inspector Thomas Scott found the corruption “about as bad as could be imagined,” with boat rentals going for twice

the market rate. Knockabouts found plenty to steal within the U.S. Army crates. At one point, a train carrying twenty-seven cars of artillery, bullets and gunpowder rolled in on the Illinois Central tracks, enough to level a half-dozen Southern cities, even as Union steamers kept transporting more liberated enslaved people to Cairo. One cold morning, a visitor walking along the levee saw “four little heads all in a row,” children huddled under a blanket. “They kept their eyes shut, not because they were asleep, but to keep the dust and smoke out.”¹⁴

Insulting epithets against the suffering refugees dotted the pages of the *Cairo City Gazette*, edited by the acerbic Copperhead Democrat Moses Harrell, who was as delighted by the flow of military dollars into his city as he was upset by the influx of freed people. “One meets them by every turn, in every street, alley and by-path,” went one typical lament. “They are still clothed in such garments as they wore in the Southern cotton and corn fields, and generally about as filthy as it is possible for animated nature to make itself.” Without the charity of the government, he thought, they would “starve and rot and die.” But the *Gazette* showed no awareness of the ordeal they had endured. Harrell never bothered to interview anyone in the camps. He also did not discuss how much he had been compensated after the U.S. Army ripped down a liquor distillery that he co-owned to make room for more artillery pieces at the confluence.¹⁵

Cairo’s prickly establishment was kinder to disloyal Confederates who fled to the safety – except if they were women who turned to prostitution. Here was another avenue, more tragic, in which women of both races played a role in shaping the disposition and the future of the southernmost city in Illinois. “They frequent low rum holes and consort with negroes,” sneered the *Evening Bulletin*, calling them “wretched, drunken, filthy, ragged creatures” who slept in doorways in the lean times when they couldn’t afford boardinghouse rooms on Commercial

Avenue for \$5 a week, bothering neighbors with “sounds of music, jollification and ecstasy.” Outside these makeshift brothels, Black men panhandled on the streets and children could be seen scavenging in trash barrels for something that might be eaten or sold. Freedwomen from slavery, desperate for sustenance, also resorted to sex work in order to avoid deprivation. Their influence remained less remarked-upon by the local press, perhaps because of the incendiary nature of the Black male and white female combination in the popular mindset of the day, most especially in the South.¹⁶

The Army managed to create jobs for a small percentage of the Cairo refugees. Officers made liberal use of manservants, and some even paid their wages on time. The abolitionist flag officer A.H. Foote hired some to work on gunboats for eight dollars a month, as well as the battery at the troop-crowded confluence now known as Fort Defiance where wooden billets had been erected in the flood plain, looking like “a lake surrounded with bathing shanties.” The freedmen acted as spotters in the task of hailing every unfamiliar ship that came into view with a cannon report. If a “private signal agreed upon” was not immediately returned from the decks, the ship was assumed to be in league with the Confederates and then sunk. Just up the Ohio River, freed people were put to work at a Union shipyard turning out dozens of ironclad troop transports for Southern rivers, though at a wage rate of one-third that of their white-coworkers. “All have a repulsive idea of going back into slavery, but would prefer going back to their old places, if they could be free there,” remarked a supervisor.¹⁷

Features of community permanence emerged, hesitantly, as the refugee population approached five thousand, roughly equal between men and women. By the end of 1864, the city’s population had quadrupled, a quarter of it now Black, and most of the freed people had found rooms or hand-built cabins away from the 32 barrack houses on the west side, where they

had to haul in drinking water from the Mississippi River by the bucketful. Black ministers in Chicago organized a relief effort to send down clothes and food, and an African Methodist Episcopal church was chartered in 1863 supplementing the white missionary James B. Rogers of the 14th Wisconsin Infantry efforts to teach Bible reading in the two schools he had set up. Freedwomen from slavery were especially interested in these endeavors.¹⁸

A visiting pastor asked an elderly woman if the noise, heat and confusion of Cairo ever bothered her.

“Oh, that doesn’t make any difference, none at all,” she answered. “Jesus is here in my heart, all the time, when I lie down and when I get up. Just the same, I pray to him all the time, in my own heart, and he has never once left me.”¹⁹

Her serenity was a rare state of mind in Cairo, as difficult and maddening a place in wartime as it had been in peace. Still, the riparian geography that had bewitched investors with dreams of the future still had the power to enchant, once away from the suffering, brawling and mud of its streets. One September evening, a young private from upstate named Edwin Loosley took a dip into the Mississippi from a beach with sand so white it “dazzled the eyes the same as snow does in the winter.” He then dried himself off and walked toward the confluence with the Ohio. Though he was a religious skeptic, he sometimes lapsed into Biblical concepts when he wrote home to his wife Ann.

“I went to where the 2 rivers meet, to the extreme point of free soil in the country,” he wrote her on September 15, 1862, when the influx of freed enslaved people was at its zenith. “On one side was Kentucky and on the other was Missouri, both Slave States, and both protectors of the institution that has already cost so much bloodshed and misery and unhappiness, and has broken up so many firesides among us, which is our own. And I could not help but regard the

war as but a great punishment for the great sin that has been committed for so many years, and I think the punishment is just, though the innocent must suffer with the guilty.”²⁰

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¹ Christopher Hays, “Way Down in Egypt Land: Conflict and Community in Cairo, Illinois, 1850–1910” (PhD diss: University of Missouri-Columbia, 1996), 123.

² Peter Pellizari, “Charles Dickens, Cairo, and the Panic of 1837,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, Vol. 111, No. 4 (Winter 2018), 20.

³ John McMurray Lansden, *A History of the City of Cairo, Illinois* (Chicago: R.R. Donnelley & Sons, 1910) 54, 56.

⁴ Charles Dickens, *American Notes*, (Boston: Estes & Lauriat, 1890), 171. A legend later arose that Dickens had been one of the disgruntled investors in the Cairo City and Canal Company and took overt literary revenge. But no documentation has emerged that he put his money into the company, whose promotion and failure became notorious among the British financial class. See Howard G. Baetzhold, “What Place Was the Model for Martin Chuzzlewit’s Eden?” *Dickensian*, Vol. 55, No. 1, January 1959, 169n.

⁵ Hays, “Way Down in Egypt Land,” 110.

⁶ Hays, “Way Down in Egypt Land,” 95. See also T.K. Kionka, *Key Command: Ulysses S. Grant’s District of Cairo* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2006).

⁷ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 14, 1861; See also William Pitkin, “When Cairo Was Saved for the Union,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (1958): 288-290.

⁸ *Cairo City Gazette*, June 13, 1861.

⁹ *Cairo City Gazette*, July 25, 1861; John Eaton, “Report on Contrabands in the Department of Tennessee,” April 29, 1863, Letters Received, series 12, Adjutant General’s Office, Record Group 94, National Archives; HL; *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, September 28, 1861. See also Pitkin, “When Cairo Was Saved for the Union,” 304.

¹⁰ Cindy Intravartolo, “St. Mary’s Goes to War: The Sisters of the Holy Cross as Civil War Nurses,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, Vol. 107, No. 3-4, Fall/Winter 2014, 375.

¹¹ Intravartolo, “St. Mary’s Goes to War,” 380-81.

¹² Leroy H. Fischer, “Cairo’s Civil War Angel, Mary Jane Safford,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, Vol. 54, No. 3, Autumn 1961, 232, 241.

¹³ George S. Boutwell, *Reminiscences of Sixty Years in Public Affairs*, Vol. 1 (New York: McClure, Phillips & Co., 1902), 293-294.

¹⁴ Kionka, *Key Command*, 2; *New York Times*, August 12, 1861; Walter Stahr, *Stanton: Lincoln’s War Secretary* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 164; *American Missionary Magazine*, May 1964.

¹⁵ *Cairo City Gazette*, October 23, 1862.

¹⁶ *Cairo Evening Bulletin*, January 1, 1869. See also Hays, “Way Down in Egypt Land,” 159, 188.

¹⁷ *Chicago Tribune*, May 14, 1861; *Janesville Weekly Gazette and Free Press*, August 9, 1861; Eaton, “Report,” April 29, 1863.

¹⁸ W. Perkins to S.S. Jocelyn, December 12, 1862, American Missionary Society Archive, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University.

¹⁹ *American Missionary Magazine*, February 1863.

²⁰ Pvt. Edwin A. Loosley to Ann Loosley, September 15, 1862, Special Collections, Southern Illinois University Library.