

# **Committee of Fifteen Records 1900-1901**



*Guide to the Scholarly Resources  
Microfilm Edition*

From the Holdings of the Rare Books and  
Manuscripts Division, Center for the  
Humanities, The New York Public Library,  
Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

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## Introduction

Scholarly Resources's decision to microfilm, and The New York Public Library's willingness to allow the microfilming of the records of the *Committee of Fifteen Records, 1900-1901*, is most welcomed and is to be highly congratulated. Through this microfilming effort a unique record group, which was quickly deteriorating, will be both preserved and broadcast to researchers and students throughout the United States and, potentially, throughout the world. The first of New York City's two antivice committees of the early twentieth century (the Committee of Fourteen, 1905-1932, followed the Committee of Fifteen and continued many of the investigations of the city's vice establishments started by the Committee of Fifteen), the New York City Committee of Fifteen sought to investigate the troubling moral situation in the city's infamous "Raines Law Hotels." This committee published its findings with the expectation that an enraged citizenry (educated by the committee's investigations) would address the problem of New York City's vice through political pressure on elected officials. In informing itself on the nature and extent of vice, usually defined as prostitution ("the social evil" was the euphemism of the era) and gambling, the committee gathered extensive files on specific locations and behaviors that it considered immoral. While the committee failed to describe specific vice problems and locations in its public report, entitled *The Social Evil: With Special Reference to Conditions Existing in the City of New York* (1902), its forty boxes of private files bulge with such information.<sup>1</sup> It is these crumbling records of the committee's investigators that Scholarly Resources has preserved and made available for scholars. Anyone interested in New York City history is in Scholarly Resources's debt.

The Committee of Fifteen records are a key source in the social history of New York City and a key source for researchers interested in the history of prostitution in the United States and its symbiont, the history of anti-prostitution groups such as the Committee of Fifteen. The new record group also makes available suggestive primary sources in immigration history, women's history, and New York City's history on this almost forgotten antivice interest group. These records are a valuable addition to all research libraries. All libraries and archives specializing in social history, women's history, urban history, and social science history will want and need this collection for its holdings.

This introduction briefly describes the background of and motivation for the establishment of the Committee of Fifteen, and mentions the committee's chairman, Long Island Railroad President William Henry Baldwin, Jr., and the committee's everyday organizer, George Morgan. It also provides a short description of the organization and richness of the record.



In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, cities and towns in the United States commonly underwent moral reform campaigns, and America's most important city, New York, was no exception. Where New York differed from every other city was in scale. It was the nation's largest, most cosmopolitan, and most intensely urban city, and was the city with the nation's most famous and powerful political machine, Tammany Hall. As a result, everything in New York, including social problems, was correspondingly larger, more complicated, and more diverse. And because of the nature of the city's politics, anything that occurred in the city carried political

implications.<sup>2</sup> A private, moral cleanup campaign aimed allegedly only at the city's vice problem—vice being defined at the times as alcohol, gambling, and female prostitution—necessarily challenged the ward-based political machine's power and income. In his 1973 article on the Committee of Fifteen, historian Jeremy P. Felt saw vice reform and this privately funded antivice committee as devices to embarrass and disgrace Tammany Hall as well as a means to encourage wider political reform efforts in the city.<sup>3</sup> He viewed the committee as a forerunner of the larger Progressive Era municipal reform campaigns of the early 1910s. Vice reform as a political technique and the Committee of Fifteen's political actions helped to achieve some reform of city government and thereby helped to restrain Tammany Hall, to some degree. But if the committee is important for what it achieved in aiding the cause of political reform in New York City, it is also important for what it did not reveal to the public about the nature and extent of vice in the city's neighborhoods, especially in the city's immigrant wards. The committee's documents and investigations of the city's vice, scattered as it was throughout the city but centered in the immigrant wards, make these primary sources particularly rich and useful.

Various well-to-do businessmen from uptown Manhattan formed the Committee of Fifteen in 1900 in response to a problem involving vice and a church on the notorious lower east side. In October 1900 an Episcopal minister, Dr. Robert L. Paddock, complained to the local police precinct about the boys who stood on the walkways in front of the bawdy houses, which surrounded his church, and handed out prostitutes' business cards to passersby. The reverend took particular umbrage when these "lighthouses," in the urban slang of the time, began distributing the

prostitutes' cards on the steps of his church. After unsuccessfully appealing to the police for assistance (the local police precinct captain told him that, if he did not like the neighborhood, he could move), Paddock contacted his superior in the church hierarchy, Bishop Henry C. Potter,<sup>4</sup> who saw an opportunity. Having been active in reform politics and in earlier antvice activities in the city, he believed that Paddock's problem could be used to expose police corruption; to reveal the police's role in protecting the city's vice; and, ultimately, to strike at the Democratic political machine, Tammany Hall. Potter addressed an open letter to Mayor Robert A. Van Wyck, reviewing Paddock's difficulties with the lighthouses and the police. Bishop Potter's letter got action. Tammany Hall's boss, Richard Croker, appointed a special committee—the so-called Committee of Five—to look into the city's vice problem, and the police captain, who had been gruff with Paddock, received a transfer to the police equivalent of Siberia—the steamboat inspection squad.<sup>5</sup>

As a direct response to Paddock's plight and Potter's agitation, numerous prominent businessmen met in November 1900 in the Chamber of Commerce building (although the meeting was not officially sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce). This gathering discussed the city's vice situation, Tammany's connections to vice, and the police protection of vice. From this meeting, and later meetings that month, emerged the privately organized and privately funded antvice organization, the Committee of Fifteen. As its goal the committee resolved:

That a Committee of Fifteen be appointed by the Chair, with power to add to its members, the duty to which it shall be to cooperate with other committees or organizations in their discretion having kindred



objects in view, and which shall carefully watch the actions of the constituted authorities whether or not they will perform to the full extent the duty imposed upon them by law to prevent and to eradicate vice in every form.<sup>6</sup>

Committeemen donated and solicited funds to run the committee. As mentioned, Long Island Railroad President, William H. Baldwin, Jr., accepted the job of chairing the Committee of Fifteen; Columbia University economics professor, Edwin R. A. Seligman, became the secretary of the committee; and he, in turn, hired George W. Morgan as the assistant secretary. Morgan, a recent graduate of the Columbia Law School, took charge of the day-to-day running of the committee's investigations, and it was he who opened the committee's office at 2115 Park Avenue.<sup>7</sup>

Seligman's hiring of Morgan proved fortuitous for the committee. Morgan was an able and efficient office manager, whose law school training stood him in good stead when interviewing tipsters or the committee's corps of investigators. His legal background proved useful in drawing up affidavits on alleged bawdy houses and their housekeepers; in knowing what specific kinds of evidence were needed (and admissible) in court; in interpreting New York state's statutes on prostitution, disorderly houses, and nuisance, as well as dealing with the city's ordinances and with its district courts and judges in shepherding the handful of cases that the committee initiated through the litigation process. After his work with the Committee of Fifteen, he became an assistant district attorney for New York (1902-1903); the superintendent of elections (1903-1906); a founding partner of the law firm of Breed, Abbot & Morgan; and eventually chairman of the board of the F. W. Dodge Corporation.<sup>8</sup>

The committee employed, and Morgan oversaw, an investigation force of at least thirty detectives during 1901, the only full year that the committee existed.<sup>9</sup> He organized the detectives' reports as they were written and developed an indexing system based on street addresses and police precinct lines. Morgan, or perhaps an assistant of his (the record group is unclear), even attempted to type transcripts of all handwritten reports of the committee's detectives.<sup>10</sup> Morgan, or the office staff, collected the investigators' reports in separate envelopes. Each envelope contained several documents: the detective's handwritten report on a location, a standard form index card with the address and the behavior observed at the location described (probably for a ready reference file), and occasionally a legal-sized printed form filled out by the investigator and notarized by Morgan, who, as luck would have it, was also a notary public.<sup>11</sup>

These working files of the Committee of Fifteen provide a remarkable picture of underground life in New York City in 1901. A review of the entire collection indicates that the committee set about the task of taking a census of every disorderly and immoral house and resort on Manhattan Island. Pool halls, card halls, and cigar stores, which acted as fronts for back-room prostitution, in addition to fancy parlor houses and single rooms in "dumbbell" tenements, are all represented in the records of the committee as locations of vice. Morgan's investigators found plenty of gambling, drinking, and female prostitution.<sup>12</sup>

This underground vitality and reality so vividly portrayed in the Committee of Fifteen's primary sources was not, however, revealed to the general public. After expending the funds raised for the investigation of the city's vice in the late summer and fall of 1901, Morgan helped to prepare the committee's report to the public. Published in

1902 by Committee of Fifteen member, George Putnam, *The Social Evil* only briefly discusses the New York vice scene in its text and did not address, until the appendix, local conditions on the problem of the so-called Raines Law Hotels; the appendix on "Present Conditions in New York" stressed the city's problem with pimps.<sup>13</sup> Instead, *The Social Evil* attacks the state regulation of prostitution—"reglementation" was the social science term of the day—as a failed public policy that hurt the women involved in the sex trade of prostitution and lowered the moral quality of the cities that regulated prostitution by involving them in the business of prostitution. In other words, the text of *The Social Evil* dealt with the current debate on vice control but left the local conditions and findings to careful readers of the appendixes. Even then, the report fails to provide any real hint of the riches of the evidence that the committee collected over the spring and summer and fall of 1901 on New York City's vice. For those records, one previously had to consult the archival records in The New York Public Library, Manuscripts Division. Now, the microfilming of the Committee of Fifteen records makes these records and the rich social and urban history available in them easily accessible to researchers. While one cannot ignore the committee's formal report, *The Social Evil*, it is these primary sources that researchers and students will consult again and again. Scholarly Resources and The New York Public Library must be congratulated on producing this crucial record group in microfilm format.

Dr. Thomas C. Mackey  
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Louisville, Kentucky  
March 1997

## Notes

1. The Committee of Fifteen, *The Social Evil: With Special Reference to Conditions Existing in the City of New York* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1902); Edwin R. A. Seligman, ed., *The Social Evil: With Special Reference to Conditions Existing in the City of New York*, 2d ed. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1912).

2. The historiography of New York City is large. For just a sampling of the recent monographic literature see Thomas Bender, *New York Intellect: A History of Intellectual Life in New York City from 1750 to the Beginning of Our Own Time* (New York: Knopf, 1987); Amy Bridges, *A City in the Republic: Antebellum New York and the Origins of Machine Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Ann L. Butterweiser, *Manhattan Water-Bound: Planning and Developing Manhattan's Waterfront from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (New York: New York University Press, 1987); Lewis A. Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981); Hendrick Hartog, *Public Property and Private Power: The Corporation of the City of New York in American Law, 1730-1870* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983); Leo Hershkowitz, *Tweed's New York: Another Look* (New York: Doubleday, 1977); Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Encyclopedia of New York City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Edward K. Spann, *The Great Metropolis: New York City, 1840-1857* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1850* (New York: Knopf, 1986); Roger D. Waldinger, *Through the Eye of the Needle: Immigrants and Enterprise in New York's Garment Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 1986); and Robert F. Wessen, *A Response to Progressivism: The Democratic Party and New York Politics, 1902-1918* (New York: New York University Press, 1986).

For cities and moral reform see Paul S. Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

3. On the Committee of Fifteen and its political consequences see Jeremy P. Felt, "Vice Reform as a Political Technique: The Committee of Fifteen in New York, 1900-1901," *New York History* 54 (January 1973): 24-51. I am at work on a larger project on the Committee of Fifteen, "Flagrant Offenses: Prostitution and the Committee of Fifteen, 1900-1902" and on the Committee of Fourteen, "New Step: The Limits of Moral Reform, Sex Customers, and New York City's Committee of Fourteen, 1920-1930."

4. Felt, "Vice Reform as a Political Technique," 26-27. See also clippings from various newspapers, Committee of Fifteen records, Box 32, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, The New York Public Library, New York, New York.

5. Felt, "Vice Reform as a Political Technique," 27.

6. "Letter of Formation," November 30, 1900, Box 1, Committee of Fifteen Records, Rare Books and Manuscript Division, The New York Public Library, New York, New York.

7. In addition to Baldwin and Seligman, the other members of the Committee of Fifteen were: Felix Adler, Joel B. Erhardt, Austen G. Fox, John S. Kennedy, William J. O'Brien, Alexander E. Orr, George Foster Peabody, George Haven Putnam, J. Harsen Rhoades, Jacob H. Schiff, Andrew J. Smith, Charles Sprague Smith, and Charles Stewart Smith.

8. No personal papers of Morgan's have been located. He was born June 28, 1875, and died March 28, 1931. See *Who Was Who in America: A Companion Volume to Who's Who in America*, vol. 1, 1897-1942 (Chicago: A. N. Marquis and Company, 1942), 865. This biography does not mention his work for the Committee of Fifteen.

For the best discussion of the membership of the Committee of Fifteen, their backgrounds, and motivations see Felt, "Vice Reform as a Political Technique," 29-33.

Morgan was the assistant secretary, and he reported to the secretary of the committee, Edwin R. A. Seligman, a Columbia University economist. Seligman studied in Germany, Switzerland, and France and became the McVicker Professor at Columbia, a position he held from 1904 to 1931. He published widely on political economy and he edited the Columbia Series in History, Economics, and Public Law, the *Political Science Quarterly*, and the *Encyclopedia of Social Science*. He listed his secretaryship of the Committee of Fifteen in his *Who Was Who* entry. See *Who Was Who in America: A Companion Volume to Who's Who in America*, vol. 1, 1897-1942, (Chicago: A. N. Marquis and Company, 1942): 1102-03.

Chairman of the Committee of Fifteen was Long Island Railroad president, William Henry Baldwin, Jr. For Baldwin see John Graham Brooks, *An American Citizen: The Life of William Henry Baldwin* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1910); George R. Nutler, *Sons of the Puritans: A Group of Brief Biographies* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1908); and *The People's Institute, Memorial to William Henry Baldwin, Jr.* (New York: n.p. [Cooper Union?], 1905).

9. No payroll records from the Committee of Fifteen have survived. Thirty detectives' names can be culled from the files of the committee; more may have been employed.

10. Some handwriting on routine Committee of Fifteen papers cannot be identified, which leads me to suspect that Morgan occasionally had office help.

11. For typical entries see Chinese Gambling, Box 5, 18 Pell Street; tenement house prostitution, Box 7, 73 Elizabeth Street; prostitution, reference to "natkes," yiddish for prostitute, with Peter Schwartz's statement about these natkes: "In the summertime they are as numerous as bees in a hive; they asked

every man that went by to come in." Box 8, Committee of Fifteen records, Rare Book and Manuscript Division, The New York Public Library, New York, New York.

12. The historiography of female prostitution and the issue of state-regulated prostitution for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is large and growing. For a selection of monographs only see Mark Thomas Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution in the Progressive Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Anne M. Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes and the American West, 1865-1890* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992); Barbara Meil Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1987); George Kneeland, *Commercialized Prostitution in New York City* (New York: Bureau of Social Hygiene, 1913; reprinted, Montclair, NJ: Patterson Smith, 1969); Thomas C. Mackey, *Red Lights Out: A Legal History of Prostitution, Disorderly Houses, and Vice Districts, 1870-1917* (New York: Garland Publishing Company, 1987); Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); William W. Sanger, *The History of Prostitution: Its Extent, Causes, and Effects throughout the World* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1859; reprinted, New York: Arno Press, 1972); and Willoughby C. Waterman, *Prostitution and Its Repression in New York City, 1900-1931* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932).

13. The Committee of Fifteen, *The Social Evil*, "Appendix: 'The Raines Law Hotel' and the Social Evil," 159-68; "Appendix: Present Conditions in New York," 180-88.

## SCOPE AND CONTENT

The records of the Committee of Fifteen contain the correspondence of its assistant secretary, George W. Morgan, with the public, committee members, New York State Assembly members, and the New York City Department of Health. The 258 letters to the Department of Health report the location of "disorderly houses." Other records of the committee's investigations include two notebooks containing entries for each location visited, along with a chronological log of visits made and actions taken against the various dwellings and businesses, typed lists of the locations visited and the types of violations found there, and 28 boxes of affidavits and reports made by the investigators. The amount of information for each location varies, but many of the report forms include the name of the investigator, his age and address, date of visit, address of the building, description of activity at that site and investigator's action, amount of money paid, name, physical description and ethnic background of the prostitutes or others at the location, and general remarks. The reports are arranged by police precinct.

In addition, the collection contains 26 scrapbooks of press clippings about New York City politics, police, and vice (November 8, 1900-November 30, 1901), typed abstracts of the events of the day (for the same period), and a typescript of the defense testimony in the trial of police Captain John D. Herlihy (1900-1901).

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|         |          | 0649      | Precinct 15: 104-314 E. 11th Street   |
|         |          | 0777      | Precinct 15: 130-528 E. 12th Street   |
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|         |          | 0925      | Precinct 15: 295 Bowery-284 E.<br>Houston Street                                      |
|         |          | 1012      | Precinct 15: St. Mark's Place;<br>Stuyvesant Street                                   |
|         |          | 1118      | Precinct 16: 48 Fourth Avenue-Sixth<br>Avenue; Broadway; W. Broadway                  |
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