



RED LIGHT DISTRICT

FROM THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY into the early years of the twentieth century, most of Portsmouth's houses of ill-fame and low-class saloons were concentrated on Water Street (today Marcy Street). City officials and the police gave unofficial sanction to these activities until 1912, when a series of four apparent murders of marines from the Navy Yard brought demands from Navy commanders that the area be cleaned up.



THE GLOUCESTER HOUSE

Not fewer than ten brothels existed on Water Street at the height of its notoriety. The Gloucester House was generally regarded as the most refined and its prostitutes commanded the highest rates in town. The building stood at the corner of State and Water Streets. Its madam was the colorful Mary Baker, a statuesque beauty who is said to have sported two diamonds inset in her front teeth.

Photograph of Gloucester House, Patch Collection. Courtesy of Strawberry Banke Museum.



CAPPY STEWART

Charles "Cappy" Stewart operated a thriving brothel and saloon at 51 Water Street, opposite the by-then defunct Marine Railway. From 1897 to 1912 he was arrested only twice, neither offense involving prostitution. After the City's clampdown on vice in the area he became a successful dealer in antiques.

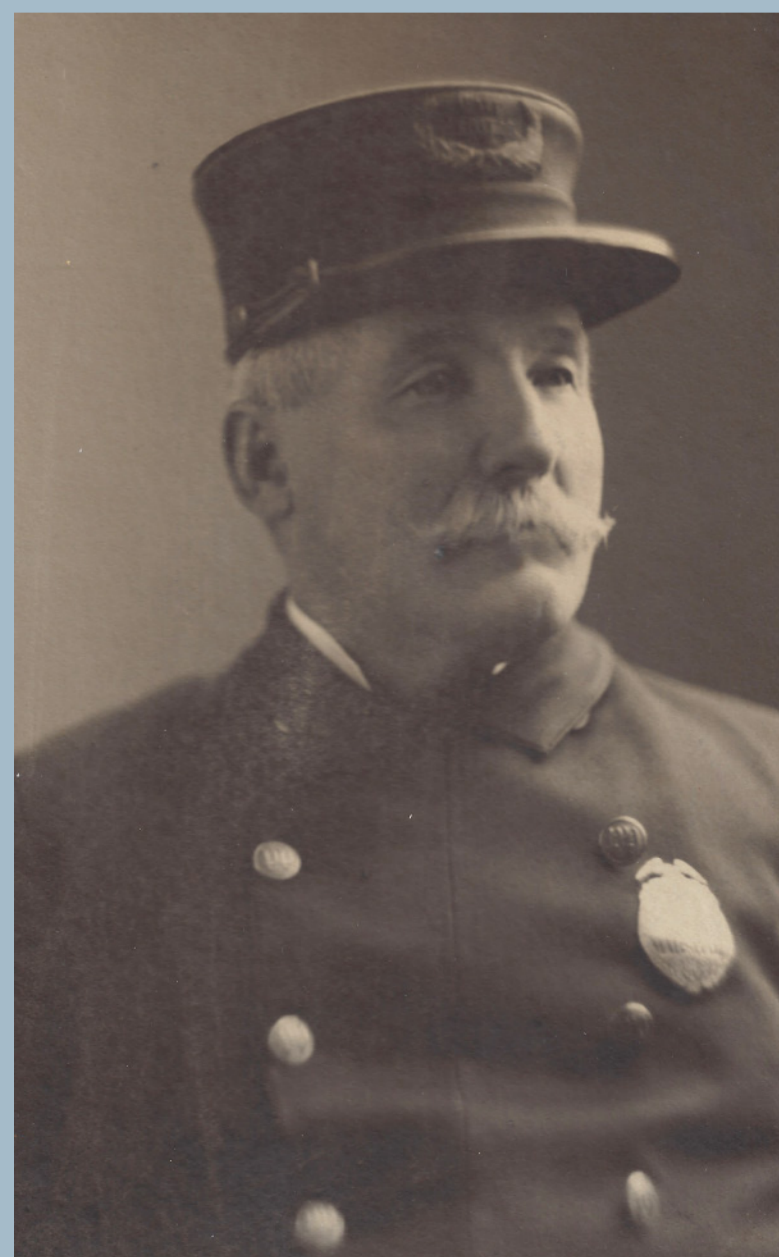
Photograph of Charles "Cappy" Stewart. Courtesy of Strawberry Banke Museum.



FOUR TREE ISLAND

Beginning about 1877, Four Tree Island, owned by Charles E. Grey, was used as a "place of entertainment" featuring prostitution and cock fighting. A dance hall and a small museum there housed such things as shoes worn by Jesse James and numerous stuffed animals. Much of this collection was destroyed in a fire in 1906. Today the island is a public park, accessible by a causeway just past the Peirce Island Bridge.

Photograph of Four Tree Island. Courtesy of Portsmouth Athenæum.



CITY MARSHAL THOMAS ENTWISTLE

For years City Marshal Thomas Entwistle, an Irish immigrant, Civil War hero, and highly popular officer in the town ensured that his force would do little to hamper the operations of the brothels and saloons on Water Street. It was commonly believed that he did so at the behest of city officials, many of whom were reputed to be frequent patrons of the brothels. Entwistle resigned from the force in 1912, bowing to intense pressure from a new city administration.

Photograph of City Marshal Thomas Entwistle. Courtesy of the Portsmouth Police Department.



SCENE BEFORE CREATION OF PRESCOTT PARK

The waterfront area remained seedy long after the brothels and saloons were cleaned out. It was not until the 1930s and the creation of Prescott Park that it slowly began to acquire its present landscaped and gentrified appearance.

Photograph of Portsmouth before Prescott Park. Courtesy of the Portsmouth Athenæum.

Funding for this historic marker was provided by the City of Portsmouth, 2015.

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