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Visual Fictions and the U.S. Treasury Courtesans: Images of 19th-Century Female Clerks in the Illustrated Press

Midori V. Green

- ¹ In early 1869, excerpts from a letter written by Hannah Tyler to the New York *Independent* were picked up by newspapers across the country. Tyler, one of the new phenomena of “lady clerks” at the U.S. Treasury Department, complained that she and her female co-workers “ought not to be insulted by having the paramours and mistresses of members of Congress forced upon us.” She claimed the offices were “crowded with females” including teenage girls “with no other recommendation than a pretty face or pretty foot,” who were not only idle, but getting in the way of others.¹ Even as it was being determined that, in fact, no such person as Hannah Tyler was employed by the department, a full-page illustration appeared in *Harper’s Bazar* with a caption denoting it as a scene from the offices of the Treasury.² The image depicts a room filled with a bevy of fashionably dressed women engaged in a host of unprofessional – and unladylike – activities, including climbing on a desk, smoking, and playing pranks. By depicting the female clerks as over-dressed women of leisure, the illustration, like the letter, suggests that the women of the Treasury Department were not only lazy workers, but morally bereft.

« The Treasury Department – The New Secretary Looking Around »



Harper's Bazar, April 3, 1869, 221.

Courtesy of the Alice Marshall Women's History Collection Archives and Special Collections, Penn State Harrisburg Library, Middletown, The Pennsylvania State University.

- 2 This was not the first time female clerks were targeted by the press. They had been the subject of much discussion since they were initially hired by the Treasury Department during the Civil War, leading to the federal government becoming, according to historian Cindy Sondik Aron, "the first large, sexually integrated, white-collar bureaucracy in America."³ Yet before the war was over, some of the female clerks were embroiled in a congressional investigation into allegations of sexual impropriety between the men and women of the department. The continued coverage by the media, in both text and image, reflected the misgivings of the public concerning the ability of presumably respectable middle-class women to work alongside men and still remain respectable, inspiring one contemporary writer to dub the women "Treasury Courtesans."⁴
- 3 The arrival of the female clerks in the Treasury Department marks the beginning of the modern, middle-class office in which men and women work together. However, the female clerk's presence upended the basic tenets of separate sphere ideology by transplanting white, middle-class women from the sanctuary of the home into the very heart of American capitalism – the actual location that pumped out the federal currency.⁵ In the popular press, the Treasury clerks became representative of the beginning of a steady shift of white women into clerical jobs. While the 1860 federal census listed a mere 601 white women employed as clerical workers, by 1870, the number had increased more than tenfold to 6,410. And by 1920, clerical work would become the largest occupational group for white women in the United States.⁶ Because large numbers of women entered the white-collar workplace just as the national illustrated press was exploding—providing more people with more images, more rapidly than before—it is worth examining the development of early stereotypes of female white-collar workers, some of which persist to this day. This article examines illustrations of the female Treasury clerks published

from 1864-1869 in the two most popular illustrated weeklies, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* and *Harper's Weekly*, along with additional illustrations appearing in two publications launched later in the decade, *Harper's Bazar* and *The Days' Doings*. The images are unique because they document the illustrated press' struggle to develop a new visual lexicon for a figure unfamiliar to its readership: the working middle-class woman. By comparing illustrations of the female clerks to those of other women in the public sphere, this article shows that the use of misleading visual tropes often called these new workers' characters into question. The employment of these pernicious "visual fictions" aided in the creation of stereotypes that continued well into the twentieth century, in turn contributing to the devaluation of white-collar women and their work.⁷

- 4 First, it is helpful to begin with a brief summary of the history and character of the periodicals that will be discussed here. As detailed in Joshua Brown's account of the rise of pictorial journalism in the United States, it was not until the end of the eighteenth century that printers were able to place engraved images alongside type. By the middle of the nineteenth century, an expanding transportation network, high literacy rates, the evolution of printing technology, and the telegraph were among the factors that led to the emergence and success of a national illustrated press. It would be the extensive coverage of the Civil War (1861-1865) that cemented pictorial journalism's importance in American life.⁸ Competitors Frank Leslie and Harper & Brothers published two of the most successful papers, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* and *Harper's Weekly*, begun in 1855 and 1857, respectively. Each issued a weekly edition comprised of sixteen pages, measuring approximately 16" x 11" each. A single large illustration usually dominated the front page, while full-page and two-page illustrations inside the issue could be removed for collection or display. Smaller images illustrated stories or called attention to snippets of news that might otherwise be overlooked. Political and social commentary also appeared in the form of single-panel cartoons, often on the back page.
- 5 National and international news, politics, fashion, fiction, crimes, tragedies, social events, the interesting and unusual were covered by both weeklies. Although *Harper's Weekly* generally (but not always, as will be shown later) strived for a higher tone aimed at a genteel audience, *Frank Leslie's* loved a scandal – and the scandalous.⁹ The paper was often fascinated with the illicit and forbidden, lavishly illustrating murder investigations with the detail found on a modern television crime show, or focusing on the "picturesque and peculiar" attire worn by the women of the Oneida Community of Free Lovers.¹⁰ In 1867, Frank Leslie launched a new weekly originally named *The Last Sensation*, but renamed *The Days' Doings* a year later. Here the more salacious stories that had appeared in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated News* found a new home, allowing the older publication to appeal to a more temperate audience.¹¹ And here, with giddy delight, the new weekly indulged the male readership's infatuation with women's legs. Ballet dancers, actresses in costume, and any scenario that would cause a woman's skirts to rise up made frequent appearances. More interesting is the number of images which show apparently middle and upper-class women challenging social norms. From the female engineer adorned in baubles and bows commanding a locomotive to the woman drunkenly climbing a street light pole after a night at the opera, illustration after illustration places the well-dressed lady in the most unexpected situations.¹²
- 6 *The Days' Doings* appeared at a time when the glorification of women's separate sphere of home and family dominated the prescriptive literature aimed at middle-class women, yet many women were actually stepping out of what was considered their traditional roles.¹³

Industrialization and the continual shifting of the population into urban centers especially impacted the lives of women.¹⁴ For some, it contributed to their reluctant entrance into the paid labor force (along with many other factors, some of which will be discussed shortly). For the more independent-minded, these changes opened up opportunities to seek meaningful work, entertainment, political voice, and independence in the public realm. However, at Frank Leslie's Publishing House and Harper & Brothers, this seems to have provoked a preoccupation with women's dress, behavior, and movements on the streets, which, at times, reveals a dis-ease with women's changing roles in modern public life. This dis-ease is made explicit in the juxtaposition of two illustrations appearing in *The Days' Doings* in 1872. Together titled "Then and Now," the pair shows just how far the modern woman had fallen from her pedestal, at least in the judgment of the weekly.¹⁵

"Then and Now"



Days' Doings (New York), April 13, 1872, 8.

From the collections of the University of Minnesota Libraries.

- 7 In the image bearing the caption "Then," a beautiful woman sits sidesaddle astride a glossy black horse. She wears a handsome riding habit and jaunty hat, ostrich plumes flying above her long, loose hair. She gazes confidently at the viewer, with just a hint of a smile. One gloved hand holds the reins lightly, the other a riding crop. She is effortlessly and elegantly in control of her horse, and by extension, her destiny. For this she receives – according to the custom of the time – the respectful acknowledgement of the male rider who tips his hat to her as he passes behind her on his horse. By contrast, the second image on the right titled "Now" shows women's descent from their previously elevated position. No longer seated comfortably on a horse, this scowling woman instead stands at street level, huddling under her umbrella on a stormy day. She clutches a wrap around her torso, which fails to even cover her arms. Her bold, striped skirt whips about her in the wind (oddly in the opposite direction in which the rain is falling), revealing the lower

calf on both legs. Rather than earning the respect of the man riding in the carriage behind her, his disapproval is registered by both his crossed arms and facial expression. Worse, the carriage wheel has splashed mud on her dress and exposed leg. In pursuit of independence, the modern woman has, in fact, lost control of her destiny, sacrificing her respectability in the process.

- 8 While *The Day's Doings* often represented women's behavior as comical and even absurd, humor also served as the spoonful of sugar to mask bitter criticism. Despite its aspirations of refinement, *Harper's Weekly* routinely published cartoons that lampooned women's fashions, poked fun at ugly spinsters, and generally mocked women's vanity. Such is the case with a cartoon appearing in the January 21, 1865 issue with the caption: "A Caution to Young Ladies Waiting for an Omnibus."¹⁶ It depicts a woman standing on the street in a doorway waiting for public transportation in the form of the omnibus (a horse-drawn passenger wagon). Although her attire, from the knees up, suggests a woman of the middle class, below the knee, her skirt is too short for that of a respectable lady. Although middle-class women wore shorter skirts in public for walking, according to the visual lexicon of the illustrated press, the degree of difference between respectable and disreputable was a matter of inches.¹⁷ In this case, the length is more suggestive of a prostitute, an idea confirmed by other clues in the illustration.¹⁸ Above the woman is the partially visible name of the business to which the doorway belongs, "&CO'S WAREHOUSE," which could be misread as "whorehouse." A small sign above the doorbell reads "A Young Man Wanted." Although ostensibly it is the warehouse that wishes to hire help, it may also be read as a coy suggestion that the young woman is looking for customers. Taken all together, the message is clear: young ladies who do not carefully guard how they appear in public risk being mistaken for immoral women – and treated as such.

"A Caution to Young Ladies Waiting for an Omnibus"



Harper's Weekly, January 21, 1865, 48.

From the collections of the University of Minnesota Libraries.

- 9 Conversely, long skirts and the depiction of sunlight were two visual tropes used to signify a woman's honor or moral redemption. For instance, the cover illustration appearing on the August 21, 1869 issue of *Frank Leslie's* depicts the "Magdalens at Work" at the House of the Good Shepherd in New York, "an institution for the reformation of fallen women."¹⁹ Dozens of women, demure white caps covering their heads, are shown hard at work in the laundry. At the center of the illustration, one of the "Magdalens" stands at an ironing table, holding up a garment as she inspects it. Her figure, as well as those of the other women, is bathed in the sunlight coming from the large windows before her. The front of her skirt is also starkly white, which, at first glance, suggests an apron. However, on closer inspection, the expanse of white is actually the fabric of her dress, which falls to the floor and trails behind her as it melds into the black fabric at the back of the skirt. The use of light and dark by the illustrator can be seen as a metaphor: her dark past falls behind her as she faces the future bathed in light and purity. Furthermore, her skirt, while impractically long for doing hot, physical work in cramped quarters, marks her as a reputable woman.
- 10 Inclement weather, short or raised skirts, and even striped fabric, were common visual tropes used by the illustrated press to denote women who were either not in their proper place or who were sexually suspect, or both.²⁰ These motifs (along with the harem, which will be discussed later) were utilized in several illustrations of the female Treasury workers. This practice challenged female clerks' respectability, thus creating visual fictions about the true nature of middle-class women's paid labor. While these tropes can also be found in illustrations of working-class women and are just as misleading, many

women entered into positions with the federal government precisely because they saw themselves as educated, middle-class ladies.²¹ Thus they eschewed factory work and domestic service (as well as the low pay and difficult working conditions), which, by the middle of the nineteenth century, were often associated with immigrant laborers.²² And while teaching was an acceptable field for many middle-class women, it also provided low wages.²³

- 11 Female clerks were first hired in 1861 by the U.S. Treasurer, Francis E. Spinner, to hand cut and count the new paper currency the federal government had begun to issue to finance the Civil War.²⁴ This routine, fussy work was seen by Spinner as a misuse of male clerks' skills, energies, and wages.²⁵ Initially, women gladly accepted the work for \$600 per year, half of the \$1200 paid to the lowest-paid male clerks at that time.²⁶ Needing to support themselves and often their dependents, many women were forced to seek wage work outside the home because of the illness or death of a father or husband.²⁷ Quickly proving to be skillful and dedicated workers, they were employed in various jobs throughout the federal government.²⁸ Women's employment in these jobs was often seen as fulfilling a debt of honor on the part of the government, acknowledging the sacrifice of the women's male family members to the war effort.²⁹ Nonetheless, according to Aron, bringing men and women together in the workplace "challenged some of the most sacred tenets of Victorian, middle-class culture."³⁰ Female clerks were seen as vulnerable, according to one contemporary writer, as their livelihoods were in the hands of men who had the potential to misuse their power and authority, including men in political office who may have helped procure the clerks' positions.³¹
- 12 Indeed, it was not long before a scandal involving the female clerks made the news. In the spring of 1864, a committee was appointed by the U.S. House of Representatives to investigate allegations of misconduct regarding the printing of currency and "the alleged immoralities" of the employees of the Treasury Department, including Spencer M. Clark, who was in charge of the division responsible for manufacturing paper currency. Representative James Brooks declared that "millions and millions of the public money" had been "sacrificed" and that the Treasury Department had been turned into "a house for orgies and bacchanals."³² Rumors began to appear almost immediately in the press about the shenanigans going on between the male and female employees of the department. One unnamed correspondent claimed that there had been "a few rooms fitted up in oriental style of splendor, and that a regular harem is kept under the control of a leading officer, for the benefit of persons high in the confidence of the President."³³ This apparently caught the imagination of someone over at *Frank Leslie's*. By the end of the month, a cartoon titled, "The Love Chase, or the Revolt of the Harem," appeared in the block of space at the back of the paper reserved for political and social humor.³⁴ In the illustration, a portly man, garbed as a Turkish sultan, is assailed by one of the women of the harem. Although quickly rendered, readers would recognize the bulbous forehead emerging from under the turban as that of Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase, whose face also appeared on the new one-dollar bills. Lightly outlined in block letters above the figures is "TRE SURY DEP," the "A" blocked by the feather in a turban. The caption reads, "1st Sultana - 'Now, Sultan Greenback, if you don't bowstring Congressional Guebres for this impudence you're not a true son of the Profit.'" This reference appears to be a play upon the theme of the (presumably Islamic) harem by positing Congress as oppositional to Chase and his handling of the Treasury ("Guebres" is an old, derisive term used to refer to Zoroastrians, followers of an ancient religion of Iran which preceded the

arrival of Islam and the prophet Muhammad, hence the substitution of “profit” for “prophet”).³⁵ Moreover, the cartoon also insinuates that the women of the harem, or in other words, disreputable female clerks, had undue influence over the running of the Treasury.

“The Love Chase, or the Revolt of the Harem”



Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, May 28, 1864, 60.

From the collections of the University of Minnesota Libraries.

- 13 The report of the congressional committee, along with hundreds of pages of testimony and evidence, was released on June 30th. Although the report mostly focused on the intricacies of printing and securing the currency, tangled up in pages of testimony, affidavits, letters, and stolen diary pages is an often rather fantastic, and definitely sordid, tale of sex and power. Evidence and testimony gathered from several women – some only in their teens – painted a picture of office life worthy of the characters in *Mad Men*: late-night drinking parties, assignations in hotels, and plans for the women to don men's clothing in order to get admittance to a “disreputable place of amusement.” In his testimony, Clark vehemently denied any improprieties between his male and female staff.
- 14 More shocking was the conduct of Lafayette Baker, the investigator initially appointed to look into the Treasury affairs prior to the congressional committee's involvement. Baker was accused of falsely arresting and detaining an officer of the Printing Bureau. Worse, in an act of “barbarity rarely surpassed,” after one of the young female clerks involved in the investigation died, Baker stopped her funeral procession in order to confiscate her body. Baker claimed that she had died from an abortion gone wrong (the pregnancy a result of a Treasury Department assignation), although a medical examination would

conclude that the cause of death was consumption and that she had died in a state of “unsullied virtue.”³⁷

- 15 The committee concluded that the charges against the employees were unfounded, motivated by interested parties to prevent the transfer of the printing of the U.S. currency from private firms to the Treasury Department, along with Baker’s own attempt to “destroy the reputation of Mr. Clark” in an effort to avoid repercussions for the false arrest. Regarding the female clerks, “a majority” of whom were the “wives or sisters of soldiers who have fallen in the field,” the committee felt that the accusations against them had been “exceedingly unjust and cruel” as they had “to some extent compromised the reputation of the three hundred females employed in the printing division.” Furthermore, in the ladies’ defense, the committee declared that in “no community in the country will there be found a larger proportion of noble and respectable women.”³⁸ Surprisingly – given the juicy details – the harem cartoon would be the only image *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* (or *Harper’s Weekly*) would publish directly referencing the scandal, although the war certainly continued to take priority in the weekly’s news coverage.³⁹
- 16 However, early the next year, *Harper’s Weekly* printed a full-page illustration, with no accompanying text, save for the caption: “Lady Clerks Leaving the Treasury Department at Washington.”⁴⁰ This appeared at the same time the daily press was reporting on arguments being made before Congress that government clerks, particularly the egregiously low-paid women, were in need of wage increases due to the exorbitant living costs in the capital.⁴¹ At first glance, nothing about the illustration itself is particularly noteworthy; the novelty of the scene apparently based solely on the sheer number of women employed by the department. The women’s middle-class status is signaled by their plain, conservative dress.⁴² Their skirts just graze the ground, revealing no more than a discreet, dainty foot to indicate that the subjects are in motion as they traverse the wet stairs and boardwalk on what is clearly a rainy day. The illustrator even indicates the reflection of the crowd in the water pooling on the boardwalk. One woman scurries over a plank placed across the moving waters in the street below. It is the use of the rain as a visual trope that underscores the meaning of the picture, infusing the scene with a melancholy that invokes sympathy for the women, while also reminding the reader of the perils faced by women who venture from the warmth and security of home.

"Lady Clerks Leaving the Treasury Department at Washington – [Sketched by A.R. Waud]"



Harper's Weekly, February 18, 1865, 100.

Courtesy of the Alice Marshall Women's History Collection Archives and Special Collections, Penn State Harrisburg Library, Middletown, The Pennsylvania State University.

- 17 This motif of inclement weather often appears in illustrations when, according to the ideology of separate spheres, women's appearance in public does not adhere to their roles as homemakers (as is the case with "Then and Now").⁴³ In depictions of these women, wind and rain frequently results in women's skirts blowing about, thus showing their legs, an indication of sexual vulnerability. These motifs also appear, and possibly originate, with illustrations of working-class women. For example, in "Sewing Girls Taking Home Their Work," several women struggle against the wind and snow, their skirts lifting to expose their calves, as they carry parcels of work to be done at home.⁴⁴ By contrast, the women in "Lady Clerks" are presented more modestly, a reflection of their middle-class status, or, perhaps, in deference to the perception of the women as war widows and orphans. The precarious liminal social space that "Lady Clerks" occupies is reflected in the ambiguous use of motifs – on one hand, evoking the hardships faced by other working women, and on the other, showing respect for their bodies by not revealing their legs. In deciding how to represent these new workers, *Harper's Weekly's* illustrators may have encountered the same problem as its rival. In his analysis of *Frank Leslie's* illustrations, Joshua Brown contends that the weekly's "confused representation of working women mirrored its broad middle readership, many of whom clung to the precepts of gentility as they were sliding upon the icy terrain of permanent wage work."⁴⁵ In other words, with a twist of fate, the female patrons of the illustrated press might suddenly find themselves slipping from reader to subject.

“Sewing Girls Taking Home Their Work”



George Ellington, *Women of New York; or The Under World of the Great City* (New York : New York Book Co., 1869), between 372 and 373.

From the collections of the University of Minnesota Libraries.

- 18 In the case of “Lady Clerks,” the ambiguity may also have reflected public concerns about whether the offices and workrooms of government were an appropriate place for middle-class women. While it was often agreed in the daily press that woman *should* be able to do many of the jobs in which they were employed, in reality, it was argued, they too often fell short compared to their male counterparts due to lack of training, discipline, and dependability. More pointed was the list of women’s failings, which fell under what one reporter referred to as an “infirmity of the sex.”⁴⁶ These gendered faults included talking too much, possessing a “mania for dress,” and a propensity to “drag the drawing-room... with its coquetries” into the office.⁴⁷ One article painted a dreadful picture of the life of the “department girl,” who overspent on cheap clothing, had no job security, no home, no family, no friends, and who was subject to the “promiscuous intercourse of boarding-house parlors,” which would surely lead to her ultimate ruin.⁴⁸ And while J.M. Brodhead, Second Comptroller of the Treasury, believed that “in diligence, attention, and propriety of conduct they are superior to clerks of the other sex,” he had “too much respect for women, however, to be in favor of employing them in public offices.”⁴⁹
- 19 Nonetheless, women continued to seek employment and the government continued to employ them. Exactly how and where they carried out their work was a legitimate topic of interest to the reading public, since the workings of the federal government itself were of general interest. By showing women as integral parts of the production of the national currency, itself a familiar, tangible commodity, illustrations could also be used to reassure doubts about working women’s integrity. In 1867, *Frank Leslie’s* published a series of illustrated articles on the operations within the Treasury Building, perhaps inspired by the detailed account provided by the 1864 congressional report (although while omitting the taint of the scandal). The focus of the series was the complex equipment, processes, and procedures used to produce and secure the nation’s currency. In the text, the women are portrayed as skilled equipment operators and accurate record keepers. The images

also confirm that these are respectable ladies. One of the illustrations appearing on May 4th shows the sealing room, operated by over two dozen industrious women. Whether standing or sitting, neither an ankle nor a foot is visible. Three more images of the women at work appear on May 25th. In all the illustrations, the artist has gone to the trouble of giving an individual identity to each of the women by depicting, if somewhat roughly, distinctly different hairstyles and dress, adding an air of dignity to the women and their work.⁵⁰

- 20 The third installment in the series appeared on September 28th with two more illustrations of women operating equipment.⁵¹ Of more importance is an illustration of the office of the assistant treasurer, which contained the vault. Although the office was located in the basement, it was an appealing space, featuring wall-to-wall patterned carpeting, attractive furniture, and even a bust, possibly of President Lincoln. The elegant dress, with skirts skimming the floor, of the five women in the room is in accordance with their surroundings. One of the women works at a desk, while two others are engaged in a conversation. They each hold documents, giving purpose to their discourse, rather than the chattiness for which women were sometimes criticized. Two more women discuss their documents with a balding, bearded man in a suit, which denotes him as a person of authority within the scene. It is the only illustration in this series showing women and men interacting (with the exception of the occasional office boy). The fact that the women are standing while talking to a male figure (rather than seated, while he stands above them) puts the women on an equal level, at least visually. This, along with the women's attire and the setting, reinforces their middle-class status and their competency as workers. Their proximity to the vault testifies to their trustworthiness.
- 21 A year later in 1868, *Frank Leslie's* printed one more view of the Treasury. The illustration is similar in composition to the previous scene in the office of the assistant treasurer, except this one shows the office of the Superintendent of the Currency Bureau, still held by Spencer M. Clark. Although *Frank Leslie's* had poked fun at the idea of a harem housed in the Treasury under Clark's care four years earlier, now, in the short paragraph accompanying the illustration, the weekly sings his praises: "To the attention and abilities of this indefatigable official are chiefly due the order and efficiency of that department. Mr. Clark has proved himself peculiarly qualified for the position, which is almost unequaled in the amount of responsibility attached to it, and the necessity for vigilance, intelligence, and systematic action."⁵² Although the women of the Treasury are not mentioned, they figure prominently in the illustration, which stretches across the top third of the page, dwarfing the text. In a handsome, sun-filled room, two women and one man each sit at identical desks in a row next to the windows, likely doing similar work. Other male figures can be seen at the back of the room. In the foreground is a man who appears to be Clark, reaching for a document held out to him by a woman. She is dressed fashionably, yet not ostentatiously. Like the two other women, her skirt is a modest length. While the text explicitly tells us that Clark is a capable, honorable man, the illustration reassures the reader that the women in his employ are equally so.

"The Office of the Superintendent of the Currency Bureau, Treasury Building, Washington, D.C."



Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, October 10, 1868, 60.

Courtesy of the Alice Marshall Women's History Collection Archives and Special Collections, Penn State Harrisburg Library, Middletown, The Pennsylvania State University.

- 22 But just when the image of the harem seemed to have been banished, it suddenly came roaring back. This time it appeared in a relatively new publication, *Harper's Bazar* (a third "a" would be added in the twentieth century, changing it to *Bazaar*), which had been launched in November 1867, as the name suggests, by the same publishing company responsible for *Harper's Weekly*. In its inaugural issue, it proclaimed its position as the first weekly paper primarily concerned with women's fashions. Hoping to appeal to the whole family with items of general interest, it claimed it would "maintain a spirit of pure and high-toned morality," eschewing "sectarian or political discussion as being outside the province of our paper."⁵³ However, as will be shown in the following example, the paper would slyly use an illustration, rather than text, to make its political commentary.
- 23 The illustration was inspired by yet another scandal, this one played out almost entirely in the press. It began with a letter by Hannah Tyler published in the March 25, 1869 issue of the *The Independent*, a weekly religious newspaper based in New York which supported abolition and women's suffrage. According to the letter's author, she was responding to an item in the previous issue concerning an increase in the salaries of women working in government departments in order to bring them on par with that of men's wages. In the *Independent's* introduction preceding the letter, the paper acknowledges that it did not have personal contact with Tyler, nor had the accusations been verified. Instead, the paper opted to toss the matter out to the public by simply printing the letter with the disclaimer, "If her statements are true, they should arrest the attention of the public; if they are false, let them be exposed." Tyler claimed to be a woman clerk in Washington, D.C. According to her, the majority of women employed by the government were unqualified for their jobs, many with "scarcely education to tell the day of the week by a counting-house calendar." Although she believed that educated women (who, by her count, seemed to be few) were "as competent to perform brain labor as men," she also believed that many of the women currently employed had been chosen for their "personal beauty or laxity of morals." The letter ends with a call to George S. Boutwell,

who had just two weeks earlier been appointed Secretary of the Treasury under Ulysses S. Grant, to “clean out the riffraff” and “appoint moral and competent women.”⁵⁴

- 24 While other news sources were quickly confirming that Hannah Tyler did not, in fact, exist, on April 3rd, a full-page illustration appeared in *Harper's Bazar* with the caption “The Treasury Department – The New Secretary Looking Around.”⁵⁵ In it, a man with the carefully-rendered face of Secretary Boutwell enters a room and is so surprised at what he finds there that he drops the book he is carrying. For what he sees is less a place of business and more evocative of a harem (or at least a Western concept of one). The variety of activities does not just illustrate the idea, but also provides an exercise in amusement for the attentive reader. In the foreground of the illustration, the woman with whom Boutwell seems to make eye contact tries to conceal a lit cigarette from his view. Sitting on a stool next to her, a woman with a quill tucked behind her ear holds up a flowered hat for admiration. Racquet in hand, one talented young lady keeps two badminton birdies aloft simultaneously. On the other side of the room, another young woman slouches in a chair, legs crossed, absorbed in a copy of *Harper's Bazar*. Not missing an opportunity for self-promotion, two of Harper & Brother's other publications – *Harper's Weekly* and *Harper's Magazine* – litter the floor along with spilt ink, books, and balls of yarn. As is the case with many of the women, the impracticability of the seated women's overly elaborate dress (including a long train easily stepped upon) and hair mark her as a woman of leisure and thus unfit for work. The illustration pointedly makes fun of her extreme hairstyle, as she remains oblivious while two mischievous ladies add to the growing collection of quills protruding from her beehive of hair. This tableau is mimicked by the women behind her who are engaged in building a tower of books atop a desk: standing on the desk, one of the women adds a quill to the inkwell perched at the top of the tower. Elsewhere in the picture, women peer out the window, engage with their needlework, or simply observe the antics.
- 25 Why would a paper purportedly dedicated to fashion and wholesome family values print such an image? Certainly the fashion choices of what appears to be kept women were not an appropriate subject. The answer lays with the *Bazar's* sister paper, *Harper's Weekly*. A column on April 10th begins by claiming that the Tyler letter, if untrue, was “one of the cruelest letters that could be written.” But then the column continues for several more paragraphs relating the accusations in the letter and using them as justification to call for a “proper system of civil service.” Or, the writer offers, if that was not possible, to at least publish the names of persons who had procured appointments for the benefit of others.⁵⁶ For skeptics of the female clerks, this might have provided a means to establish if influential men were hiring women for their charms, rather than their competencies. And by publishing the text and the illustration separately, Harper & Brothers could coyly attempt to avoid being accused of making an outright attack on the women, while still getting its point across.⁵⁷
- 26 However, the female clerks had their supporters. On April 10, the *New York Times* reprinted a letter from the editor of the *Columbus (Ohio) State Journal*, dated a week earlier, in which the editor, going only by the initials J.M.C., claimed that he had checked, and no person named Hannah Tyler was listed as employed by the Treasury Department. Employing his own gendered stereotypes, he was clearly disgusted by the new accusations and those responsible for them: “The dear old maiden ladies of both sexes have wagged their heads over the delicate morsel of Hannah Tyler, and they will fight like the old cats they are before they surrender one crumb of slander.” Since the editor was in

Washington at the time, he decided to take the matter in hand “as the charge has been made repeatedly that there is widespread demoralization and corruption among the female clerks, that the Treasury Department is a sort of Congressional harem, and the female clerks generally concubines.” J.M.C. thus began an investigation into the actual activities of the women working within the departments of the government.⁵⁸

- 27 Escorted by Francis E. Spinner himself, J.M.C. found neither a harem nor the spacious, sun-filled spaces in the last *Frank Leslie's* illustration, but rather crowded, unventilated rooms rank with “conglomerated bad smells” from both natural and chemical sources, working conditions so bad that he viewed it as “slow suicide.” In spite of this challenging environment, Spinner had asserted that the women were superior to men in similar positions and “vastly underpaid.” J.M.C. also vouched for the women’s good character by noting some of their pedigrees (one clerk was the niece of two governors) as well as their personal contributions to the war effort (one woman was an informant, another a Nightingale at the Gettysburg Hospital). Besides these heroes, J.M.C. noted that there were “scores of soldiers’ wives, sisters, and daughters.”⁵⁹
- 28 The *Atlantic Monthly* would also run an article in August thoroughly debunking the Tyler letter as a “common trick with people who want places, to get letters and paragraphs inserted in newspapers, complaining that a certain department or bureau is full of fogies, or fossils, or Andy Johnson men, or ancient sires who have been in office since the time of Jackson.” In particular, the author noted, such people did so “to create vacancies in the department which employs the greatest number of women.” Like J.M.C., this author also visited the Treasury where she/he “passed some hours there, and kept looking out for the paramours and mistresses.” Instead she/he found hard-working “ladies” – who were “so respectable in appearance” – laboring in an unhealthy work environment.⁶⁰
- 29 However, the *Harper's Bazar* illustration would resurface again that same year in *The Women of New York or the Under-World of the Great City*, a copious 650 page illustrated collection of salacious essays on every stripe of woman, from pickpockets to female physicians.⁶¹ Stuck in the middle of a twelve-page wardrobe inventory (valued at \$21,000) of a “fashionable lady’s wardrobe,” the image appears with a new caption, “Female Clerks in Possession of the Counting-House.” The illustration’s new title and positioning implies that women cannot be trusted in positions of financial responsibility.⁶² Devoid of its original context, the image and its negative connotations were not only applied to a new group of female workers outside the Treasury Department, but also reached new audiences beyond readers of *Harper's Bazar*. While newspaper and magazine reports of scandals referred to specific individuals and events in a fixed place and time, this illustration, detached from the actual events, also created a “visual fiction,” which, like the visual tropes discussed earlier, served to generalize the behavior and moral character of working women.
- 30 Despite uncertainty about how to portray middle-class working women during and directly after the war, by the end of decade certain visual motifs were in place. In an 1871 London edition of *The Days' Doings*, the illustration “Woman’s Rights – Employment of Lady Clerks in Government Offices,” shows male and female clerks hurrying home on a rainy day. It unabashedly employs all three of the negative motifs used for transgressive women: a rainy day, short skirts, and striped fabric. In the illustration, two lady clerks emerge from the Treasury Building clutching an umbrella between them as they navigate the steps, eyes cast downward, and thus apparently unaware of the two men who have turned back to gaze at them. And what a sight they are. Compared to the illustration

appearing in the 1865 *Harper's Weekly* of the exact same subject matter – female clerks leaving on a rainy day – these young women are dressed much less conservatively, even when compared to the women in the background of the image. Here, one woman wears a striped cloak which flails about in the wind. Her flounced skirt comes only to the top of her boot, just covering her calves. The woman next to her flashes a bit of light-colored stocking between skirt and boot. The flippant caption's true meaning is only fully revealed in a tiny paragraph at the bottom of the same page, which explains: “wet and slippery weather gives an excellent opportunity to the clerks of the ruder sex, to investigate the understandings of their co-labourers.” Apparently women who are bold enough to assert their rights to earn a living must also subject themselves to men's right to ogle them in public. While this caption was published in the London edition of the weekly, the image likely also appeared in the U.S. edition, and the implication of the visual motifs would have been equally clear to an American audience.⁶³

“Women's Rights – Employment of Lady Clerks in Government Offices”



The Days' Doings (London) May 20, 1871, 268.

Courtesy of the Alice Marshall Women's History Collection Archives and Special Collections, Penn State Harrisburg Library, Middletown, The Pennsylvania State University.

- 31 By 1870, almost a thousand women were working in the offices of the federal government in Washington, D.C., where a decade before there had been none.⁶⁴ In this short period, women's bodies – real and symbolic – were exploited for both political purposes and cheap labor, despite many women's search for middle-class respectability in the workplace. Among other challenges, women became the subjects of negative visual stereotypes almost as soon as they began entering the sexually-integrated office. While these stereotypes may seem ubiquitous today, especially in the image of the “sexy secretary,” at the time the federal government began hiring women to work in its departments, the middle-class female clerical worker was a new figure. As depictions of

working women continued to proliferate in the ever-expanding publishing and advertising industries, some images provided women with new ways to envision themselves, as well as legitimize women's presence in the office. However, too often these images served to limit working women's opportunities and power in the workplace by linking their professional competencies to their sexuality or gender, as is the case with the illustration appearing in *Harper's Bazar*. Viewed together, these early images of female clerical workers, which focus on a specific, identifiable group of workers, reflect the often conflicting and shifting attitudes about a woman's place in the workforce, a discourse that continues today. Yet these illustrations also suggest that, during and after the Civil War, whether by choice or out of necessity, many middle-class women were undaunted in their pursuit of employment – and a place in the public sphere.

NOTES

1. "Women as Clerks in Washington," *The Independent* (New York), March 25, 1869.
2. "The Treasury Department – The New Secretary Looking Around," *Harper's Bazar*, April 3, 1869, 221.
3. Cindy Sondik Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen of the Civil Service: Middle-Class Workers in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 5.
4. John B. Ellis, *The Sights and Secrets of the National Capital: A Work Descriptive of Washington City in All Its Various Phases* (New York: United States Publishing Company, 1869), 384.
5. On the female clerks middle-class origins, see Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, 40-44.
6. Matthew Sobek. "Major occupational groups – white females: 1860-1990." Table Ba1103-1116 in *Historical Statistics of the United States, Earliest Times to the Present: Millennial Edition*, edited by Susan B. Carter, Scott Sigmund Gartner, Michael R. Haines, Alan L. Olmstead, Richard Sutch, and Gavin Wright. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. <http://dx.doi.org.ezp2.lib.umn.edu/10.1017/ISBN-9780511132971.Ba1033-4213>. This information also appears in my dissertation "Sec's Appeal: The Secretary in American Popular Culture, 1872-1964," PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2012, 6.
7. This article is an expansion of material I touched upon in my dissertation ("Sec's Appeal," 3-5, 35-41.) I first encountered the Treasury clerks in Cindy Sondik Aron's excellent work on the early history of these women, which aided me in initially recognizing several of these images (including at least two not included here) in the Alice Marshall Women's History Collection Archives and Special Collections, Penn State Harrisburg Library (for whose research support I am grateful).
8. Joshua Brown, *Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 1, 22-24, 26, 48-50.
9. Brown, *Beyond the Lines*, 24, 40-41.
10. "The Bond Street Murder," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, February 14, 1857, 174, 176; February 21, 1857, 181, 184-185; February 28, 1857, 200-205, 208; March 7, 1857, 211, 216 (illustrations of Mrs. Cunningham); Isaac G. Reed, Jr. "The Oneida Community of Free Lovers," April 2, 1870, cover, 37-41 and April 9, 1870, 54-57, 61.

11. Joshua Brown, "The Days' Doings: The Gilded Age in the Profane Pictorial Press," paper presented at the American Studies Association Annual Meeting, Hartford, Connecticut, October 17, 2003. Accessed April 4, 2014 at www.joshbrownnyc.com/daysdoings.
12. For examples of illustrations see "A Lovely Blonde Employed as an Engineer on a Western Railroad – "Danger Ahead!" *The Days' Doings* (New York), April 20, 1872, 8; "The Result of a Champagne Supper After the Opera – A Recent Scene on Lexington Avenue, New York," *The Days' Doings* (New York), June 1, 1872, 16.
13. For an example see Catharine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe. *The American Woman's Home: Or, Principles of Domestic Science; Being a Guide to the Formation and Maintenance of Economical, Healthful, Beautiful, and Christian Homes* (New York: J.B. Ford and Company, 1869).
14. For a history of women's wage labor, see Alice Kessler-Harris. *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States*. 20th anniversary ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
15. "Then and Now," *Days' Doings* (New York), April 13, 1872, 8.
16. "A Caution to Young Ladies Waiting for an Omnibus," *Harper's Weekly*, January 21, 1865, 48.
17. Lois W. Banner, *American Beauty* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983) 75. Banner states: "since the late 1830s, only prostitutes had bared their ankles for street wear. The skirts of genteel women swept the streets. In New York City short skirts had become identified with the waitresses at the 'concert saloons'...who practiced prostitution on the side." My review of contemporary fashion illustrations shows that by the late 1860s, shorter skirts became fashionable for walking or "promenading" (Banner also notes that shorter skirts for ice-skating did become acceptable). However, in my observation, the "short" skirt covered the calf, revealing only women's boots (which I suspect may, at times, have been slightly exaggerated by illustrators for effect). In "Omnibus," the young lady seems to be exposing her stockings, indicated by the hint of a lighter color above her short boot. For a more complete discussion of short skirts, including their adoption by working-class women, see Banner, 74-76. For an example of a fashionable, middle-class "promenade suit," see *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine*, January 1867, 21. For an example of a short skirt and stripes on a working-class waitress in a "beer-saloon," see "Scene at the Calaboose, St. Louis, Mo.," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, January 25, 1868, 296.
18. For an example of an illustration of a prostitute in a short skirt, see "Women of Pleasure on the Promenade," in George Ellington, *Women of New York; or The Under World of the Great City* (New York: New York Book Co., 1869), between 210 and 211.
19. "The House of the Good Shepherd, An Institution for the Reformation of Fallen Women...," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, August 21, 1869, front cover. See also Brown, *Beyond the Lines*, 105-107, for a brief discussion of this illustration.
20. In reviewing illustrations in the publications discussed here, I have observed that bold stripes were most commonly used by Frank Leslie's illustrators, particular in *The Days' Doings*. In black and white illustrations, stripes stand out, thereby calling attention to the wearer. According to Michel Pastoureau, who has examined the history and iconography of the stripe, including in the depiction of prostitutes, prisoners, and clowns, it "often appears as the mark par excellence, the one that shows up the best and that emphasizes most strongly the transgression (of one kind or another) against the social order." *The Devil's Cloth: A History of Stripes and Striped Fabric*, trans. Jody Gladding (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001): 13-16.
21. For a full treatment of middle-class women's entrance into government positions, see Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen* and Cindy S. Aron, "'To Barter Their Souls for Gold:' Female Clerks in Federal Government Offices, 1862-1890," *The Journal of American History* 67 (March 1981): 835-853.
22. Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*. Illini Books ed. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987) 44,155-157.
23. Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, 4, 45.

24. Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, 70, 73. Prior to war, a few women worked as copyists, but did their work at home.
25. "General Spinner and the Women Clerks," *The Woman's Journal*, January 10, 1891.
26. Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, 70.
27. Aron, "To Barter Their Souls," 838-848.
28. Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, 72.
29. Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, 144-145; Select Committee to Investigate Charges against the Treasury Department, Treasury Department, H.R. Rep. 140, 38th Cong., 1st sess., vol. 2 (1864) at 17; "The Female Clerks: How They Are Employed in the Treasury Department, With Some Account of Who They Are," *New York Times*, April 10, 1869.
30. Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, 6.
31. Ellis, 383-387.
32. H.R. Rep. 140 at 1, 31.
33. "From Washington: Charges against the Treasury Department," *Newark Advocate* (Newark, OH), May 06, 1864.
34. "The Love Chase, or the Revolt of the Harem," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, May 28, 1864, 60.
35. Various nineteenth-century accounts of the Guebres are available on Google Books. For example, see "Fire-Worship," *Knowledge: An Illustrated Magazine of Science, Literature, & Art*, October 1, 1887, 269-270; Frederick Shoberl, *Persia: Containing a Description of the Country, with an Account of its Government, Laws, and Religion, and of the Character, Manners and Customs, Arts, Amusements, etc. of its Inhabitants* (Philadelphia: John Grigg, 1828), 156-157.
36. H.R. Rep. 140 at 15-16, see also testimony and appendices; for Clark's response to the charges, see "Appendix W., Letter from S. M. Clark to chairman of committee," at 368-372.
37. H.R. Rep. 140 at 16-17.
38. H.R. Rep. 140 at 17.
39. On the scandal, see also Aron, *Ladies and Gentleman*, 166-169; Michael Thomas Smith, "'A House of Orgies and Bacchanals': The 1864 Treasury Department Scandal," in *Fears of Corruption in the Civil War North* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2011) 97-126, and Kerry Segrave, in *The Sexual Harassment of Women in the Workplace, 1600 to 1993* (Jefferson, N.C. and London: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 1994), 103-104.
40. "Lady Clerks Leaving the Treasury Department at Washington," *Harper's Weekly*, February 18, 1865, 100.
41. "Thirty-Eighth Congress, Second Session," *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, DC), February 11, 1865; "Salaries of Clerks," *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, DC), February 22, 1865.
42. Stansell 93-94; Banta 75-77. Stansell asserts that "the respectable woman on the street deflected rather than drew attention to her physical presence," and favored "muted colors" (93), while Banner writes that, although fashion presented confusing messages about class, "certain sectors of the upper classes...made simplicity their hallmark" (77). Although some images of the female clerks show them in more stylish dress, which I argue acts to signify their individuality, *extremes* in dress are used to present women in a negative light.
43. For a discussion of Frank Leslie's depictions of women in public, including working women, see Brown, *Beyond the Lines*, 103-112.
44. Ellington, between 372 and 373.
45. Brown, *Beyond the Lines*, 112.
46. "Female Clerks," *Chicago Tribune*, March 31, 1865.
47. "Female Clerks," *Chicago Tribune*; "General Spinner and the Women Clerks," *The Woman's Journal*, January 10, 1891; "The Lady Clerks in the Departments," *New York Times*, November 10, 1865; "Woman's Labor and Reward," *New York Times*, Dec 23, 1866.

48. "A Woman in Washington City: What She See, Hears, and Thinks," *The Daily News and Herald* (Savannah, Georgia), August 11, 1866.
49. Joint Select Committee on Retrenchment, Civil Service of the United States, H.R. Rep. 47, 40th Cong., 2nd sess., vol. 2 (1868) at 36.
50. "The Manufacture of Greenbacks," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, May 4, 1867 104-105; "The U.S. Treasury Department," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, May 25, 1867, pg. 152-154.
51. "The Treasury Department at Washington," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, September 28, 1867, 21-22.
52. "The Office of the Superintendent of the Currency Bureau, Treasury Building, Washington, D.C.," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, October 10, 1868, 60.
53. "Our Bazar," *Harper's Bazar*, November 2, 1867, 2.
54. "Women as Clerks in Washington," *The Independent* (New York).
55. "News of the Day," *Alexandria Gazette*, April 3, 1869.
56. "Hannah Tyler's Letter," *Harper's Weekly*, April 10, 1869, 227.
57. On April 6, 1869, *The Independent* also published new letters responding to Hannah Tyler's letter, one of which denied her existence. Others defended the clerks or added to the list of charges, calling for reformation of the present system of employment "where merit alone shall be the measure of recompense."
58. "The Female Clerks," *New York Times*. For evidence that it was the male editor of the *Columbus State Journal*, see "The 'Strikers' of the Washington Lobby," *The Atlantic Monthly*, August 1869, 227-228. For another example of support for the woman, see also, "Government Clerks," *New York Times*, May 17, 1869.
59. "The Female Clerks," *New York Times*. On sub-par working conditions, see also Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, 72.
60. "The 'Strikers' of the Washington Lobby," *The Atlantic Monthly*.
61. Ellington, *Women of New York*.
62. Ellington, between 134 and 135. "A Fashionable Lady's Wardrobe" is the chapter title appearing on page 125.
63. "Women's Rights – Employment of Lady Clerks in Government Offices," *The Days' Doings* (London) May 20, 1871, 268. A London edition of *The Days' Doings* was published for several years, and from what I can ascertain from the few London editions I have seen, it appears that some illustrations were also used in the U.S. editions. Due to the scarcity of *The Days' Doings* in archives, I have not yet been able to review a full run of the weekly in order to ascertain whether "Women's Rights" also appeared in the U.S. (a special thank you to Joshua Brown for his assistance in trying to locate this illustration in the U.S. edition). For this reason, there may also be additional illustrations in *The Days' Doings* of the Treasury clerks of which I am not aware or have not confirmed. For a discussion about the two editions of *The Days' Doings*, see Ellen Williams, "How I, Rare Books Cataloger, Became the World's Expert on The Days' Doings," *Special Collections Processing at Penn* (blog), September 25, 2012, Penn Libraries. <http://pennrare.wordpress.com/2012/09/25/how-i-rare-books-cataloger-became-the-worlds-expert-on-the-days-doings/>.
64. Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, 5.

ABSTRACTS

During the Civil War, the United States Treasury began hiring female clerks to work within its departments, a decision that would lead to the federal government becoming, according to historian Cindy Sondik Aron, “the first large, sexually integrated, white-collar bureaucracy in America.” By 1864, a congressional committee had already begun looking into accusations that some of the women were mistresses of government officials and that the Treasury Department had been turned into a harem. A second scandal, this time playing out in the press in 1869, renewed the old imagery of the harem. This article looks at how female Treasury clerks were portrayed in the two most popular illustrated weeklies at the time, *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* and *Harper’s Weekly*, as well as *The Days’ Doings* and *Harper’s Bazar*, and the use of misleading visual tropes that called women’s characters into question. The employment of these pernicious “visual fictions” aided in the creation of stereotypes of working women that continued well into the twentieth century, which, in turn, contributed to the devaluation of white-collar women and their work.

INDEX

Mots-clés: culture populaire, émancipation féminine, États-Unis, histoire culturelle, illustration, art

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