

'Lost Virtue' exhibit sheds light on Pensacola's historical Red Light District

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A poster featured at the "Lost Virtue" exhibit located in the Destination Archaeology building in downtown Pensacola

Photo by Gina Alford-Dickerson

A bottle of red nail polish, a glass marble and a piece of a broken record player are all items currently on display at the Destination Archaeology Resource Center in downtown Pensacola.

These artifacts and many more are part of a new exhibit titled "Lost Virtue: Pensacola's Red Light District." This exhibit gives visitors a glimpse into the life of the prostitutes working in Pensacola during the late 1800s through the early 1900s.

"I think it's a really important part of Pensacola history that gets overlooked a lot," exhibit curator Jackie Rodgers said.

The exhibit, which opened Sept. 19, is part of the Florida Public Archaeology Network, an archaeology program at the University of West Florida and other Florida universities. Rodgers said she hopes her exhibit will put more spotlight on FPAN and the resources it brings to the Pensacola community.

"Some of the artifacts that are on display now, I don't know if the public has ever really seen before," said Mike Thomin, the museum manager for the DARC and co-curator of the exhibit. "So that's what is great about this kind of program that we have, is we're constantly able to bring in new stories with the objects that go with them."

"Lost Virtue" showcases the research Rodgers has been doing during her time as a graduate student at UWF. Her thesis also focused on Pensacola's historic Red Light District.

"I'm excited to be able to share these artifacts because I've been working with them for like three years now," Rodgers said. "I'm super glad to be able to share them with people and really get people excited about the same things that I've been excited about for three years."

According to Rodgers, Pensacola's Red Light District was in operation from about the late 1880s until 1941. It spanned four city blocks, which included Main, Palafox, Government, Barcelona and Spring streets. A majority of the artifacts were found along Zaragoza street, which is where most of the brothels were located.

There were not many career options for women during that time period. Rodgers stated the most common jobs for women included running a boarding home, being a seamstress, a laundress or a cook. Many women chose prostitution because it paid substantially more than their other options.

During her research, Rodgers also found that Pensacola's Red Light District lasted about 25 years longer than any other red light district in the United States. This piece of information is part of what sparked her interest in the topic.

"It's kind of mind boggling to think that Pensacola—it's a fairly small town—had a district that big that lasted that long, and had that many women living in it," Rodgers said.

UWF graduate student Mallory James, who was attending the opening of the exhibit, said the exhibit gave an "interesting twist" on a part of Pensacola's history that is rarely told.

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"I like all the archaeological parts to it," James said. "I'm a history major, but I minored in anthropology. So I like the part where they're talking about the excavations, how long they had to do it, the collections.

"I kind of like the background more, the archeological side of discovering it, that was kind of cool."

"Lost Virtue" is free to visit, and will be open until the end of January 2015.

"I hope what this exhibit does is it humanizes these women," Thomlin said.

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