

Mollie Walters House

• 2528 • POSTOFFICE •

As a port city and the site of military installations, Galveston had a rough side from the beginning. The fortunes of the Island's saloons and bordellos usually paralleled those of the community at large. When 25-year-old Mollie Walters arrived from New Orleans in 1868, the local economy was recovering after the Civil War. With Federal troops occupying the city and the port booming, Galveston saw a resurgence in prostitution and the emergence of an identifiable red-light district.

Although now commonly referred to as simply Postoffice Street, the "segregated district" of saloons and bordellos that developed after 1865 was centered in the 2500 through 2900 blocks of Market and Postoffice streets and would eventually expand to the same area on Church and Mechanic streets. It was in this neighborhood that Walters operated her first "female boarding house," as brothels were euphemistically known, on the west side of 25th Street between Market and Mechanic.

In September 1870, Walters pleaded guilty in Criminal Court to keeping a "disorderly house," paid the customary \$100 fine and returned to business as usual. Ten years later, the 1880 census shows Walters was still in business on 25th Street as the madam of a house occupied by five "boarders" and the three-year-old son of one of the women.

Walters apparently prospered through the 1880s. She bought several pieces of property, including a house on the northeast corner of Postoffice and 26th. In 1886, Walters tore down the building that stood on her Postoffice Street land and built a two-story, 15-room "female boarding house." The long, narrow frame structure had entrances on both Postoffice and 26th streets. A porch with lattice would have screened customers waiting for admittance from the view of passersby.

When Congress authorized installation of the coastal artillery at Fort Crockett in 1897, Galveston's bawdy houses were among the indirect beneficiaries. The resulting problems confronting military health officials helped spur a crackdown on the city's bordellos. Nevertheless, fines remained low and the municipal government only sporadically enforced the vagrancy ordinances which applied to prostitutes.



By the 1900 census, three "boarders" were in residence at 2528 Postoffice, all in their twenties. The 67-year-old Walters was still running the business, although she listed her age as 40. On August 29, 1906, Walters signed a five-year lease with Corine Pearce who agreed to pay \$100-a-month rent for the Postoffice Street property. One month later,

Mollie Walters purchased a home at 3518 Avenue O and retired. She lived there until her death on December 14, 1908. Her obituary in the local newspaper described her as "an old resident of Galveston."

Walters' estate sold the Postoffice Street house, which continued to be used as a brothel. When the United States entered World War I, a national law banned prostitution within five miles of all military installations. The Army threatened to declare Galveston off-limits unless local officials shut down the brothels. Although Galveston's bordellos were officially closed, the "boarders" were allowed to remain in residence, with predictable results.

After the war, the brothels continued to operate unabated. In 1936, city officials required that all prostitutes receive medical examinations every two weeks and maintain health certificates. When the Army threatened to declare Galveston off-limits again at the start of World War II, the red-light district was officially closed for the second time, although eleven bordellos were reportedly still in business in 1943.

After a brief resurgence in the early 1950s, a crackdown by state officials finally ended Galveston's days of open prostitution. Since then, the Walters property has served as a rooming house.

The building has remained largely unchanged since the 1890s, when the projecting bay was added on the 26th Street side. The current owner intends to restore the house to its turn-of-the-century appearance. Plans include a catering kitchen, banquet facility and overnight accommodations. The 1886 Mollie Walters House is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.



