

“City Slave Girls” of Chicago:
The Fundamental and Forgotten Exposé of Nell Nelson

This paper seeks to restore the instrumental work of Nell Nelson in exposing the cruel and unsanitary working conditions of Chicago’s manufacturing industry during the late nineteenth century. Nelson’s series, “City Slave Girls,” was published in *The Chicago Daily Times* in late-July, 1888. The early publication of the series places Nelson as a pioneer of investigative reporting. Nelson provided ground-breaking work in exposing the mistreatment of the women and children that worked in Chicago’s manufacturing industries. The success of her series is a bewilderment considering the extensive inversion of social norms represented in the writing of her exposé. The “City Slave Girls” series put into question the practices of the most prestigious men of Chicago; yet, Nell Nelson was a woman unable to even vote due to the gender restraints of her time. Through her satirical and witty writing, Nelson beat the adversity of being a woman in the nineteenth century and the publication of the series gained attention from Chicago’s political representatives along with the owners of the very industries she scrutinized. Although the significance of the series was recognized at the time of publication and for some time after, Nelson’s role in exposing the hardships of the “City Slave Girls” lacks any proper representation in history of today. The “City Slave Girl” series should be a monumental resource of information for women’s history, labor history, and the history of undercover journalism.

On July 30th, 1888 the first article of the twenty-one part series was published on *The Chicago Daily Times* front-page under the bold and controversial headline “City Slave Girls.” The series was authored by Helen Cusach Carvalho under the ambiguous pseudonym, Nell Nelson.¹ Nelson was hired by the then editor of *The Chicago Daily Times*, Charles Chapin, on

¹ Eric W. Liguori. “Nell Nelson and The Chicago Times ‘City Slave Girls’ Series: Beginning a National Crusade for Labor Reform in the late 1800s.” *Journal of Management History*, 18, no. 1 (2012): 61.

January 21st, 1888.² Nelson credits Chapin for the assignment stating her series “was accomplished in the regular routine of newspaper duty, and at the request of the editor of the *Chicago Times*”.³ Chapin’s assignment to the freshly hired Nelson was “to seek employment in sweatshops and factories and report back in the conditions under which girls were forced to work”.⁴ Nelson exceeded beyond the parameters laid out by Chapin. The “City Slave Girl” series exposed far more than just the working conditions of industrialized Chicago. Nelson described details regarding wages, treatment of employees, sanitation, and working environment; however, it is her in-depth observations of the personal lives and appearances of the working class women and children that exposed the true injustice that occurred in Chicago’s manufacturing industries. Nelson’s series was produced through the investigation of nearly sixty Chicago establishments.⁵ Nelson was employed by over fifteen of the sweatshops and factories that were included in her investigation.⁶ By interviewing the already hired girls and through her observations while trying to obtain work, Nelson also wrote detailed reports on several of the industries that declined her employment.

There are three sources used in this paper where the “City Slave Girls” series is available for reference. The entirety of Nelson’s series is published on New York University’s digital library as microform duplicates of the original articles as they appeared in *The Chicago Daily Times*.⁷ Some of the series was also reprinted in a book titled *The White Slave Girls of Chicago*

² See Liguori: 61.

³ Nell Nelson [pseud.]. *The White Slave Girls of Chicago*. (Chicago, IL: Berkley Publishing Co., 1888). Also available on microfilm at *History of Women: No. 3519*. (New Haven, CT: Research Publications Inc., 1976):3.

⁴ See Liguori: 61.

⁵ See Liguori: 62.

⁶ See Liguori: 62.

⁷ Nell Nelson. “City Slave Girls.” *Chicago Daily Times* (Chicago, IL), July 30-August 19, 1888 and August 26-27, 1888. Accessed via the NYU digital library at <http://dlib.nyu.edu/undercover/city-slave-girls-nell-nelson-chicago-times-aka-white-slave-girls-new-york-world>.

published by the Berkley Publishing Co. in September, 1888.⁸ A second book published by R.S. Peale & Company titled *The White Slave Girls of America* was also published in 1888 and provided several of the articles as well.⁹ Although helpful due the clarity of text, both of the books have a significant amount of editing and lack several features of Nelson's series that helped to distinguish its significance. Firstly, the original series was published on the front-page of *The Chicago Daily Times*. As a leading paper of its time and place, *The Chicago Daily Times* was so widely viewed that following the publication of the series Nelson received inquiry for employment at one of the most prestigious papers of the time: New York's *The World*¹⁰ and landed the book deal that produced the publication of *The White Slave Girls of Chicago*. The microform duplicates on the New York University's digital library guide illustrated the importance of the series placement in the newspaper. The series held daily front-page recognition for over two weeks of *The Chicago Daily Times*. The series became so well-known with such haste due to the front-page coverage that while still undercover Nelson's investigation of one company led to questions of her own identity: "'Aren't you from THE TIMES?'" asked one of the foremen in a quizzical way... 'You might be Nell Nelson disguised in pants for all I know'".¹¹ Another edit in the book publications that hindered the representation of Nelson's impact is the censorship of the names and the removal of the investigated companies' addresses. Nelson intentionally detailed in the original publication of the series the names of the companies, identities of the owners/managers, and the exact street addresses in hopes of complete exposure.

⁸ Nelson [pseud.]. Accessed via microfilm (*History of Women: No.3519*).

⁹ John T. McEnnis. *The White Slaves of Free America*. (Chicago, IL: R.S. Peale & Company, 1888). Accessed via Harvard University's digital library.

¹⁰ The series was republished as a Sunday feature of New York's *The World* in November and December of 1888. See the NYU digital library at <http://dlib.nyu.edu/undercover/city-slave-girls-nell-nelson-chicago-times-aka-white-slave-girls-new-york-world>.

¹¹ See Nelson [pseud.]: 102.

On July 29th, 1888 the front-page of *The Chicago Daily Times* published a full-page advertisement promising “Not a batch of sensational stories, in which names are fictitious and addresses are suppressed, but a series of articles which point to the men who are growing rich at the expense of human life and blood”.¹² Following a lawsuit claiming misrepresentation Nelson cleverly abbreviated the names of the establishments in her book publication of the series.¹³ Even though the abbreviations were enough to protect from additional lawsuits, Nelson’s in depth description of the establishments still provided some exposure in identifying the culprits responsible for the mistreatment of Chicago’s working class women. The following example illustrates Nelson’s ability to expose without legal repercussion, “At the N----- R----- Jersey Company I was told to apply at the factory on West Washington street”.¹⁴ In the Berkley publication each report begins with this similar description of the location and/or building exterior of each establishment investigated as well as the truncated title of each company/manufacturer. The R.S. Peale & Company publication omits all names of companies stating, “It has not been deemed advisable here to give the names of the firms and corporations, but those sufficiently interested may peruse the files of the Chicago Times”.¹⁵ By stating the series availability to be reviewed at anyone’s leisure suggest the series popularity and ease of access at the time. The original series revealed the name and address of each company/industry and gave complete exposure of the scoundrel, capitalist responsible for the poor conditions Nelson reported. The final big difference between the original newspaper articles and the books is that in both books the series is abridged. The Berkley book provided only segments from each

¹² See Liguori: 62.

¹³ *The Chicago Daily Times* was sued for misrepresentation by one of the manufacturers Nelson exposed according to the NYU digital library at <http://dlib.nyu.edu/undercover/city-slave-girls-nell-nelson-chicago-times-aka-white-slave-girls-new-york-world>.

¹⁴ See Nelson [pseud.]: 14.

¹⁵ See McEnnis: 17.

of the articles that were originally published. Each of the articles originally had four to five subtitles and listed a series of three or four investigations; meanwhile, the Berkley book typically provided only two of the subtitles and reports per chapter. The *White Slave Girls of America* book had text from the author framing some of the original investigative reports. The author, John McEnnis, incorporated only the articles that fit into the context of the concerns raised in each of the chapters. Even though the books lacked some of the basic elements from the original series that provided significance there is still importance in the fact that the series was so quickly published into book forms. Both of the books were published within a year of the series' original release. Due to a significant number of fires and the well-known corruption of Chicago, the original series was difficult to locate. The New York University digital library was an essential tool in the restoration of Nell Nelson's and provided evidence of the articles as the series appeared in the *Chicago Daily Times*. Even though the republished series from New York's *The World* had more readily accessible microform duplicates additions made to the original series were not noted and there was an unclear separation between the original articles and the added ones. Therefore, this capstone's purpose is to illuminate Nelson's Chicago series and *The World* articles were not pursued in the primary research.

Much like her series, Nell Nelson's biographical information was also illusive. In order to avoid confusion throughout this paper Helen Cusach Carvalho will remain being mentioned by the name Nell Nelson; however, it is important to remember that in the biographical context of the research provided she is referred to not by her pseudonym but by her real name. The extent of what could be found regarding a biography of Nell Nelson comes from a journal article

written by Eric W. Liguori in 2012.¹⁶ Liguori estimates Nelson to have lived from 1865 – 1945. By studying 1930 U.S. census information Liguori supposes Nelson to have been born in Missouri and then to have moved to Chicago and New York in pursuit of a career in journalism.¹⁷ Liguori concludes that Nelson married the wealthy, Solomon Solis Carvalho in 1895.¹⁸ The possibility that Nelson’s journalist career ceased after her marriage is plausible considering there is no found evidence of her work following her publications in *The World*. The census information attributes two daughters to the marriage of Carvalho and Nelson.¹⁹ According to an obituary found in a 1945 *New York Times* publication Nelson died in New Jersey. The obituary lacks any special recognition of her investigative series despite the popularity and influential effects it had on labor concerns/reforms of the late nineteenth century.²⁰

The ambiguity of Nelson’s obituary was the beginning of numerous examples in the extensively misleading historiography of Nelson’s “City Slave Girls” series. Although the series was mentioned in several secondary sources there were frequent undervaluing, misrepresentations of Nelson and the *Chicago Daily Times* series. The “City Slave Girls” series lacked any substantial annunciations in the majority of the sources where it is mentioned. However, one secondary source found, titled “Nell Nelson and *The Chicago Times* ‘City Slave Girls’ Series: Beginning a National Crusade for Labor Reform in the Late 1800s,” provided a detailed evaluation of Nell Nelson and her series. The author of the article, Eric Liguori,

¹⁶ Eric W. Liguori. “Nell Nelson and The Chicago Times ‘City Slave Girls’ Series: Beginning a National Crusade for Labor Reform in the late 1800s.” *Journal of Management History*, 18, no. 1 (2012).

¹⁷ US Census (1930), *US Census Record of Union County, City of Plainfield, NJ, District 20-117, Sheet 14-A*, Bureau of the Census, Department of Commerce, Washington, DC.

¹⁸ Solomon Solis Carvalho as a leader in the Pulitzer Organization was made Assistant Vice President of *The World* in 1892. After leaving Pulitzer, Carvalho established the Hearst’s magazine empire and received an estimated salary of \$25,000. Nelson’s marriage to the wealthy Carvalho would have allowed her to quit her job as a journalist. See Liguori: 76.

¹⁹ Nelson and Carvalho had two daughters named Helen C. Steele (born in 1892) and Sarah C Crehore (born in 1897). See Liguori: 76.

²⁰ *New York Times* (1945), “Obituary: Carvalho – Helen Cusach”, *New York Times*, October 29.

emphasized the series direct connections with national labor reform movements. Liguori provided detailed research regarding the series and provided evidence connecting Nelson to over twenty reformists/reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.²¹ The others sources used in this historiography were primarily selected to provide historical context surrounding industrialization and labor reforms, women's societal roles in the late-1800s', Chicago and *The Chicago Daily Times*, nineteenth century journalism and the origins of investigative reporting. Part of restoring the series was to discover where in history Nelson's work should be mentioned with value. This capstone serves to prove there are three main areas of history that would benefit in the pronouncement of the "City Slave Girls" series including: women's history, labor history (regarding industrialization and labor reform), and the history of undercover journalism / investigative reporting. There is a minute discussion of Nelson's writings that came from sources on nineteenth century women in journalism and undercover reporting. In Alice Fahs book *Out on Assignment: Newspaper Women and the Making of Modern Public Space* typecasts Nelson as "part of a new articulation of modern life in which newspaper women become performative public figures".²² In a few short paragraphs Fahs claimed Nelson's series to be a group of "sensational" articles that entertained the curiosities of women's "cross-class fantasies".²³ Fahs credited *The Chicago Daily Times* series for publishing response letters, which allowed for the concerns of women to be publically conversed.²⁴ However, it is evident that Fahs book distinctively pigeonholed Nelson's series as a set of "novelty" stories published merely to entice women readers through the adventurous tale of a middle class woman assuming

²¹ Eric W. Liguori. "Nell Nelson and The Chicago Times 'City Slave Girls' Series: Beginning a National Crusade for Labor Reform in the late 1800s." *Journal of Management History*, 18, no. 1 (2012).

²² Alice Fahs. *Out on Assignment: Newspaper Women and the Making of Modern Public Space*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011: 7.

²³ See Fahs: 7.

²⁴ See Fahs: 231.

the “off-limits” role of an improvised working girl.²⁵ In the book *Front Page Girls: Women Journalists in American Culture and Fiction, 1880-1930* Nelson’s series should be discussed with great detail because the widespread influence of the series was in big part owed to the series front page coverage in *The Chicago Daily Times*.²⁶ However, the series is completely left out of the book and Nelson is only briefly mentioned for having authored the “White Slave Girls” series published in New York’s *The World*. The author, Jean Marie Lutes, presented Nelson as a rival to the historically popularized female investigative journalist Nellie Bly.²⁷ The complete disregard for Nelson as a nineteenth-century forerunner of undercover journalism is particularly evident in the texts (like Lutes’ book) that pay attention only to Nelson’s later series published in *The World*. The remaining books used in the research of this capstone regarding women in journalism and the origins of investigative reporting fail to mention Nell Nelson entirely. *Taking Their Place: A Documentary History of Women and Journalism* provided sample articles from typically popularized female investigative reporters.²⁸ Included in the selection was Nellie Bly and Ida Tarbell; they were used to compare with Nelson’s series. The compilation of documents provided general historical context regarding women in journalism.²⁹

Another aspect of journalism researched in providing the historical context of this capstone

²⁵ See Fahs: 6.

²⁶ Jean Marie Lutes. *Front Page Girls: Women Journalists in American Culture and Fiction, 1880-1930*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006.

²⁷ Nellie Bly began writing for *The World* in 1887. Her fame began with the undercover investigative series on the conditions at the Blackwell’s Island Asylum for the mentally-ill. Bly is credited for first coining the term “white slave” in reference to the poor working girls of New York. Nelson is merely mentioned as a rival journalist of Bly’s at *The World* and the blatant disregard for Nelson is evident in the misspelled reference to her real name Cusach recorded as “Cusak.” See Lutes: 12, 31, 175n53.

²⁸ Maurine H. Beasley and Sheila J. Gibbons. *Taking Their Place: A Documentary History of Women and Journalism*. Washington D.C.: The American University Press, 1993.

²⁹ See Beasley: 10. “Only 288 women were listed as journalists out of a total 12,308 persons so classified in 1880, but the numbers soon increased. By 1900 there were 2,193 women in the count, out of a total 30,098. Many of the women staffed the newly created women’s and society pages of metropolitan newspapers, offering advice on fashions, homemaking, manners, and romantic relationships.” --- Nelson was an obvious outlier of the normal nineteenth century female journalist.

comes from the information directly referring to the publication of *The Chicago Daily Times*. In *Communities of Journalism: A History of American Newspapers and Their Readers* David Nord compared the *Times* to the *Daily News* and the *Tribune*. He emphasized the push near the end of the nineteenth century towards more urbanized Chicago newspapers.³⁰ As referenced in *Charles Chapin's Story: Written in Sing Sing Prison*, the editor that hired Nelson explained he was employed by *The Chicago Daily Times* with the instruction to restore urban appeal of the newspaper.³¹ Weeks after gaining employment Chapin went on to hire Nelson. In examination of the sources regarding nineteenth century journalism, undercover reporting, and of *The Chicago Daily Times* a proper representation of the "City Slave Girls" series is clearly absent. Secondary sources regarding women's labor history provided a slightly more weighted argument promoting Nelson's work than the sources on newspaper women. One primary focus of the women's labor sources was the controversial terminology Nelson used to describe working girls. In Lara Vapnek's paper, "Desires for Distance: White Working-Class Women's Rejection of Domestic Service in the Late 19th-Century United States," the term "City Slave Girls" is connected to publicizing the working class girls' slave-like employment.³² As Vapnek pointed out, the term "City Slave Girls" brought attention to the inhuman practices of industrialization by the title's direct relation of women's urban labor to African American slavery.³³ In her 2009 book,

Breadwinners: Working Women and Economic Independence, Vapnek credited Nelson's "City

³⁰ David Paul Nord. *Communities of Journalism: A History of American Newspapers and Their Readers*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001. Nord explains that Chicago newspapers moving into the nineteenth century had to abandon traditional individualistic motives in order to keep up with the growing urban existence and the necessity to address social issues of industrialization and urbanization (108-9).

³¹ C.E. Chapin. (1920), *Charles Chapin's Story: Written in Sing Sing Prison*, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, NY.

³² Lara Vapnek. "Desires for Distance: White Working-Class Women's Rejection of Domestic Service in the late 19th-century United States." Paper presented at the Intimate Labors Conference, UCSB, and October 4-6, 2007.

³³ See Vapnek (2007): 10-11.

Slave Girls” series as a primary investigation into the “capitalist exploitation” of urban working girls.³⁴ Similar to the emphasis of the slavery connotation from her paper, Vapnek refers to Nell Nelson as a “latter-day abolitionist, writing to expose the inhumane conditions endured by the city’s working girls and women, who imperiled their health and endured humiliation to help make ends meet”.³⁵ On the other hand, the term ‘white slave girls’ has a present-day connotation that blurs the line between the working-class girls Nelson wrote about and the later use of the term referring to prostitutes. While some may see Nelson’s use of the term ‘slave girls’ as an ode to the injustices of slavery there are others that speculate the specification of ‘white slave girls’ gives off an ideal of white supremacy. For example, on page 114, of the book *Sisters in Sin: Brothel Drama in America, 1900-1920* Katie Johnston states that the term ‘white slave’ used in nineteenth century newspapers “invoked a sense of injustices, in that ‘Innocents’ – those with white blood – were wrongfully forced into slavery” through industrialization. Regardless of debates that surround the series title, Vapnek, in both her paper and book, emphasized the nineteenth century labor trends moving away from women’s domestic labor and towards industries where opportunity for the reform of women’s labor and societal roles would be possible.³⁶ As illustrated in *Women, Work & Protest: A Century of U.S. Women’s Labor History*, working class women of the nineteenth century were in a battle against gender and class roles.³⁷ In *The Rising of the Women*, Meredith Tax argued that working women’s “subordinate position

³⁴ Lara Vapnek. *Breadwinners: Working Women and Economic Independence, 1865-1920*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009: 35.

³⁵ See Vapnek (2009): 56.

³⁶ See Vapnek (2009): 35.

³⁷ Ruth Milkman, ed. *Women, Work & Protest: A Century of U.S. Women’s Labor History*. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985. Although this book does not directly mention Nelson or her series it does provide historical context in regard to the gender roles of nineteenth century women in both the private and public spheres.

in the home and in society at large was reinforced in the workplace”.³⁸ As made evident in Nelson’s series, working women faced societal concerns regarding the morality of their work and faced a battle against unfair wages and working conditions due to their gender. Vapnek’s particular angle highlighting the pride illustrated by the working women that wrote to *The Times*, regarding themselves as “breadwinners or self-supporting working women,” provided one of the few examples in this historiography to Nelson’s series as early evidence of desire to reform.³⁹ Vapnek insinuates the public presence of independent working women, as seen in Nelson’s articles, helped to direct women’s gender roles away from the constraints of domestic work and towards a more egalitarian lifestyle with their male counterparts. The general consensus of the secondary sources published in the 20th and 21st centuries provided little emphasis of the substantial agitation and influential effects of Nell Nelson’s “City Slave Girls” series. Next to the significance Liguori’s journal article placed on the series, Richard Schneirov’s book *Labor and Urban Politics: Class Conflict and the Origins of Modern Liberalism in Chicago, 1864-97* gave the only other modern indication to the series importance when originally released.⁴⁰ Although Schneirov described *The Chicago Daily Times* series along the same parameters as most of the other sources in this historiography he put specific emphasis on the instantaneous interest stimulated following the original publication.⁴¹

Evidence derived from sources published within a few years of the “City Slave Girls” series support Schneirov’s and Liguori’s indications of its significance at the time. The 1890 book, *Live Questions: Including Our Penal Machinery and Its Victims*, reprinted the response

³⁸ Meredith Tax. *The Rising of the Women*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980: 30. This book helps shape the roles played by women in labor reform.

³⁹ See Vapnek (2009): 64.

⁴⁰ Richard Schneirov. *Labor and Urban Politics: Class Conflict and the Origins of Modern Liberalism in Chicago, 1864-97*. Brookfield: Millbrook Press, 1998.

⁴¹ See Schneirov: 270-71.

letter to the series publication of Chicago's Governor John Altgeld.⁴² The preface of the book indicated its purpose was to invite "investigation and wide discussion" pertinent to resolving the public issues presented by each article/letter republished within.⁴³ In his letter to *The Chicago Daily Times* Altgeld praised the series as an illumination of the injustices experienced in the Chicago industries.⁴⁴ Altgeld admitted, in his letter, that the legislation in place lacked proper enforcement and would need significant agitation in order to gesture in new reforms.⁴⁵ When questioned whether a woman should earn equal pay to man Altgeld made a radical statement for a political figurehead of his time to make. Altgeld concluded that if the quality and quantity of a woman's work was equal to that of a man then her pay should be equal also and "to deny her this is to deny her justice".⁴⁶ Altgeld attempted to make some justification on behalf of the industrialists; in his claim, the factory owners were forced to pay American women low wages because the immigrant workers wiliness to work for very little drove down the standard of wages.⁴⁷ The original publication of this controversial letter is significant because it showed the great extent to which the series was perceived.⁴⁸ The direct correspondence with Altgeld provided proof that the agitation and interest that surrounded the series was significant enough to warrant a response from the governor. The significance that two years later the letter was republished in this book indicated the lasting effects the series and the letter responses had on the nineteenth century Chicagoan society. Similarly McEnnis's inclusion of several large segments

⁴² John P. Altgeld, "Slave Girls of Chicago," *Live Questions: Including Our Penal Machinery and Its Victims*. (Chicago: Donohue & Henneberry, 1890).

⁴³ See Preface of *Live Questions: Including Our Penal Machinery and Its Victims*.

⁴⁴ See Altgeld: 87.

⁴⁵ See Altgeld: 92.

⁴⁶ See Altgeld, 93.

⁴⁷ See Altgeld, 95.

⁴⁸ According to the unknown editor's note, John P. Altgeld's response letter to the editor of *The Chicago Daily Times* was originally published on September 9th, 1888 in *The Chicago Daily Times*. See Altgeld, 80.

from Nelson's series in his 1888 book *The White Slave Girls of America* emphasized his high regard for Nelson's work in exposing the turmoil related to industrialization. McEnnis's preface mirrors the preface found in *Live Questions: Including Our Penal Machinery and Its Victims*. Both books, much like the series itself, wished to counter the injustices against the urban working girls through the excitement and agitation of people with the power and will to usher in reform.⁴⁹

As detailed in Liguori's article, Nelson's series was a direct influence in the propulsion of Chicago's labor reform movements. Chicago was an epicenter for women's movements. The "City Slave Girls" series challenged women to stand up against the oppressive labor systems and demanded all of society to take notice of the injustices being done upon them. *The Chicago Daily Times* published a brief interview with Colonel Abner Taylor⁵⁰ regarding the positive influence that came from the "general agitation" done by Nelson's series.⁵¹ Colonel Taylor told Nelson, "When you ask me what society can do to better the condition of the working girls I answer that society can agitate, just as THE TIMES has agitated... I am informed that the condition of very many establishments where women are employed has been greatly improved since THE TIMES began its investigations."⁵² Evident from Colonel Taylor's interview was that the series' goal to spark the interests of reform had great success. Before the entire series had even been completely published records show that the Ladies' Federal Labor Union used the reports gathered in the series to ban together in the fight against poor working conditions. At a

⁴⁹ See McEnnis: Preface iii. See *Live Questions...*: Preface

⁵⁰ See Nelson: August 31, 1888. According to the article Colonel Abner Taylor was the "bachelor republican candidate for Congress in the first Illinois district". Colonel Taylor called for the creation of a "special board whose sole duty it should be to inspect the places where men and women work in large cities" and he felt the responsibility should not fall entirely on the health department.

⁵¹ See Nelson: August 31, 1888.

⁵² See Nelson: August 31, 1888. When summarizing his points for 'agitation' Colonel Taylor makes the following statement, "The great remedy is agitation. That arouses the public mind to a realizing sense of the situation, and more can be done in that way than in any other I know of."

meeting of nearly “every woman and civic organization in Chicago” the conditions reported on in the series was heavily discussed and the instrumental influence of the series directly resulted in the formation of the Illinois Woman’s Alliance.⁵³ The IWA lobbied broadly for reform against sweatshops and child labor and for education legislation and public baths in the urban works areas of Chicago.⁵⁴ The IWA were not the only people ‘agitated’ by the inhumane conditions that Nelson reported on to suggest education as a possible solution. *The Chicago Daily Times* publish an interview with Judge O.H. Horton; in which, Horton declared “This question of female and child labor, like many other social questions, I do not know how to compass except by educating the people to a higher standard...In fact, as regards all semi-moral questions, there is absolutely no use in passing aggressive laws any faster than the people are educated up to them.”⁵⁵ Horton’s argument helped paid homage to the emphasis on the lack of public morality recognized throughout Nelson’s series. An earlier interview published in *The Chicago Daily Times* with Charles L. Hutchinson⁵⁶ proposed a similar argument on morality as Horton. Hutchinson told Nelson he lacked courage in the abilities of legislation stating, “The fact is you can’t legislate morality.”⁵⁷ Hutchinson proposed that public sentiment would be derived from the education of all society. The education Hutchinson referred to was grounded in the public’s agitation against human injustices. While some argued for reform in the public’s education as the ultimate solution others encouraged official government investigations of the institutions

⁵³ See Liguori: 66.

⁵⁴ See Tax: 67.

⁵⁵ See Nelson: August 30, 1888. The article informed the readers that Judge Horton served on the circuit court in Chicago. There is special emphasis regarding Horton’s wiliness and desire to meet with *The Chicago Daily Times* in order to relay his opinions about the working-girl conditions.

⁵⁶ Hutchinson was the President of the Chicago Board of Trade on Female and Child Labor. See Nelson: August 22, 1888.

⁵⁷ See Nelson: August 22, 1888.

Nelson exposed. In 1892, The Hull House⁵⁸ successfully encouraged the Illinois Bureau of Labor Statistics to appoint a special agent to investigate the local conditions Nelson had reported.⁵⁹ The official reports produced from these investigations mirrored Nelson's findings and was further proof to the necessity for reform. Many of the women's institutions in Chicago expanded their call for reform into other states and Nelson's series became a quick reference to the conditions working women faced.⁶⁰ Part of the connotation put on the "City Slave Girls" series came from the positive regard of the series' 'agitation' for reform, while a more negative stance on the series introduced a separate emphasis in the considered significance of the series. *The Chicago Daily Times* published an interview with S. Mandel, the owner of a dry-goods retail house Nelson exposed, in which Mandel insisted the retail work he provided for women encouraged morality and high self-regard among his employees.⁶¹ Mandel proposed that women of bad morality were of such on their own accord and that labor had not caused the decline in proper femininity. Mandel was stringent in regarding his own company with the highest caliber. Mandel's defensive standpoint and negative reproach for the representation of his company in Nelson's investigation illustrated the influence of the series on the reputations of Chicago's establishments. The series made employers question new hires and they became weary not to hire a possible investigator that could be working undercover to expose their company.⁶² Nelson

⁵⁸ "The Hull House was a settlement house located in the Nineteenth Ward of Chicago...the Hull house name carried much political clout and focused on achieving social reform." See Liguori: 68.

⁵⁹ See Liguori: 68. The Hull House was able to get their own resident, Florence Kelly, in as the special agent hired by the bureau. Kelly produced detailed maps of Chicago's Nineteenth Ward illustrating the travesties induced by Chicago's industrialization/urbanization.

⁶⁰ One example of a Chicago woman that expanded her reform efforts was Florence Kelly. Kelly moved from Chicago to New York and brought with her the ideals of reform installed in her from her participation at the Hull House. See Liguori: 68.

⁶¹ See Nelson: August 31, 1888.

⁶² See Liguori: 64.

brought into question the character of the most prominent men in Chicago through her exposure of their businesses and their disregard of human life for the sake of capital.

The “City Slave Girls” series influenced a widespread interest in labor reform and public ‘agitation’, on account of, Nelson’s detailed and witty description of her undercover experiences. Nelson investigated a wide variety of Chicago’s industries including feather factories, corset shops, lace manufacturers, cloak sewing shops, cigar-rolling companies, neck-tie factories, meat packing markets, and retail shops. Investigations into clothing manufacturers occupied a majority of the series to start; however, Nelson’s eventual investigation into the Packingtown meat facilities illustrated the broad spectrum of establishments that Nelson exposed for having poor working conditions and unfair wage labor.⁶³ Nelson reported the typical working girl’s day from soliciting work to requesting pay; Nelson spared no details. Nelson withheld her identity and claimed false skills in order to compete in the remarkably robust factory-girl, job market. In one report Nelson wrote, “I followed the crowd through both buildings beginning in the basement and going up and up and up the narrow, dirty, covered stairs, stopping on each floor to see the ‘boss’ and apply for work. No success.”⁶⁴ Nelson described the frustration working girls faced with the likelihood of not gaining employment after an entire morning’s search. Nelson’s middle-class perspective pitied but rarely distracted from the evident tribulations faced by the female, urban laborers. In fact, Nelson’s ability to recognize inner-class conflicts provided a unique and significant view on the unjustified situations faced by the poor working girls. The report on the establishment of Julius Stein & Co. reflected Nelson’s displeased tone for the disregard upper-class shop owners gave in the consideration of factory girls’ livelihoods. The

⁶³ Nelson’s investigation of the Packingtown establishment preceded the famous book, *The Jungle*, authored by Upton Sinclair in 1906, which again publicized the unsanitary/poor conditions of the facilities. See Liguori: 64.

⁶⁴ See Nelson: August 9, 1888.

subtitle of the article read, “Insulted and Browbeaten: After Working All Day for 75 Cents the Heartless Managers of the Slave-Pen Refuse to Advance Car Fare to a Penniless Factory Hand.”⁶⁵ Nelson refused to allow society’s constraints of her own gender and class influence the accusations she made against the most prominent men and industries of Chicago. Nelson wrote, “But worse than broken shoes, ragged clothes, filthy closets, poor light, high temperature and vitiated atmosphere was the cruel treatment by the people in authority.”⁶⁶ Nelson called these industries out and exposed the unjust conditions faced upon employment. The majority of industries Nelson reported on told of unsanitary/unhealthy work environments, the ill relations between employers and the ‘slave girls,’ lack of just wages, and ridiculous fees/fines placed on the women/children. In one headline, Nelson described employment as “a Day Among the Serfs and Bondwomen in the shops of ‘Little Hell’.”⁶⁷ During her investigation Nelson became personally connected to a great deal of individual women as she heard and reported on their lives and the hardships they faced. In one article, Nelson pitied the poor women she met and stated, “Never so long as reason reigns shall I forget the day I worked in H.G.’s tailor-shop, and never when I pray shall I forget to add ‘God help the shop girls’.”⁶⁸ Nelson reported on the loss of faith, health, youth, and morality among the working girls and rightfully blamed the industries for what was done to these women. At one point in the series Nelson told the tale of a widow forced into prostitution when her wages as an over-all seamstress became inadequate to support

⁶⁵ See Nelson: August 1, 1888.

⁶⁶ See McEnnis: 42.

⁶⁷ See Nelson: August 9, 1888. The first mention of the shops as “Little Hell” came in the opening line of this article and stated, “It was 7 a.m. by all the whistles in ‘Little Hell’ when I reached that section of the city in search of an opening in a slop-shop.”

⁶⁸ See Nelson [pseud.]: 55.

her child.⁶⁹ The “City Slave Girls” series was laden with tales of young girls that couldn’t attend church or learn to read because they were accustomed to daily labor since childhood.⁷⁰ Nelson used attempted to do what she could for the women several times giving the little wages she earned during her undercover stints in the factory to fellow factory workers; however, the biggest justice Nelson did for the women was done by exposing the industries.

The evidence found in the “City Slave Girls” series from *The Chicago Daily Times* provided the kind of in-depth descriptions of industrialization that the field of women’s labor history could surely benefit from. Nell Nelson’s middle-class perspective and advocating for justice among the poor, working girls alluded to the societal roles of nineteenth century women across the class spectrum. Nelson’s reports would provide historians with a primary witness account of the corruption and injustice among Chicago’s industries. Finally, Nelson’s role as one of the first female investigative reporters should be recognized especially after her dedication going undercover and determination to completely expose the establishments she investigated. As was evident in the historiography Nell Nelson lacks any proper representation in history. The fields of history touched upon in this capstone that would benefit from the restoration of Nelson’s work include women’s history, the history of nineteenth-century labor and industrialization, and the history of female, investigative journalism. However with further consideration of the “City Slave Girls” series there is evidence that the history of the United States would benefit from the series recognition.

⁶⁹ See Nelson: August 14, 1888. The headline read “Starvation Staring Her in the Face She Sold Her Honor Rather Than Part From Her Baby.”

⁷⁰ See McEnnis: 52. An example of this can be seen in the following quote from a young girl interviewed by Nelson, “No, I don’t read the papers and I don’t go to church either. Haven’t anything to wear. Most of the time I stay at home and sew.”

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