

# American Underworld: The Flash Press

*Crime, Scandal, and Blackmail Papers of the  
19th Century*



## Quick Facts

A unique, rare, short-lived and often bawdy form of journalism

Exposes the seamier aspects of urban life including scandal, brothels, blackmail, wagering and more

Rare insights into urban life, criminal activity, and the underground economy and literature of the 19th century

## Overview

The appearance of the terms “licentious” and “licentiousness” in American periodicals rose dramatically in the early 1840s, in tandem with the origins of these unruly urban newspapers collectively called the Flash Press. One of the earliest titles in this unique, rare, and short-lived form of journalism was William J. Snelling’s New York City newspaper, *The Flash*, which inspired scores of copycat papers.

The newspapers in *American Underworld: The Flash Press* covered the seamier aspects of urban life: crime, scandal, brothels and blackmail, combined with reviews of the bawdiest theatrical performances on offer and reports on sporting events such as cock-fighting, boxing and horse racing. Stopping well short of pornography, they played a delicate game with the police. With tongue-in-cheek humor, their editors often moralized against the very topics they covered, but did not shy away from including thinly-cloaked advertisements alongside. To many of their readers, the Flash Press also conveyed an implicit threat of blackmail, which often led to very ephemeral print runs.

The Flash Press arose and crested between the 1830s and the 1850s. Many of its papers had suggestive titles such as *Venus’s Miscellany*, *the Boston Blade*, *the Libertine*, and *the Broadway Belle*, with content to match. Others, such as the *New England Police Gazette*, *Life in Boston and New York*, *Broadway Omnibus: A Panorama of Metropolitan Life*, and *Theatrical World* had a wider range. Many also included original stories, poems, and songs.

The more than sixty papers in *American Underworld: The Flash Press* were collected by the American Antiquarian Society, whose curators report that they are heavily researched there. They are among the rarest of all American newspapers, and are of particular interest to scholars in the fields of women’s studies, ethnic studies, urban life, criminal activity, and the underground economy and literature of the 19th century. With the publication of *American Underworld: The Flash Press*, this unique collection will be available for the first time to scholars worldwide.

Sample titles include *Boston Satirist*; *Broadway Belle*, and *Mirror of the Times*; *Flash*; *Life in Boston and New York*; *Monthly Cosmopolite*; *New York Sporting Whip*; *Stephen H. Branch’s Alligator*; *Weekly Rake*; *Whip*; *Whip*, and *Satirist of New-York and Brooklyn*; and many others.



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