

## Temperance in the Champlain Valley

The Temperance movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Champlain Valley paralleled the moral impulses of many other rural communities and small towns across America. Protestant religion in rural and small-town America in the 1800s powered an urge to purify society for the good of all by rooting out “intemperance,” represented as a danger to the traditional family structure, notions of femininity and masculinity, and a healthy society. Temperance, which overlapped with a multitude of social reforms in the 1800s, was also couched in the language of abolition by suggesting that alcohol robbed the freedom/liberty of those who used it, likening the issue to the plight of the African American slaves in the South. This connection to abolition dominated temperance across the north until the end of the Civil War, when new changes in American society (relating to immigration and politics) took precedent over religion in the movement.

Early Vermont history was characterized by a lack of “morality” in the eyes of surrounding states. Famous political characters like Ethan Allen were also hard-drinking religious dissidents. A moral and religious reaction to this resulted in a powerful plunge into the 2<sup>nd</sup> Great Awakening in the Champlain Valley. The farming regions along Lake Champlain, in particular, became a “Burned-Over Region” as religious fervor swept across them.<sup>1</sup> Missionaries from Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York arrived to reform the morals of the valley in the early 1800s.

Increases in alcohol-related issues made “intemperance” an all-encompassing target for protestant religious and social reformers. Whiskey was often cheaper than coffee, tea, milk, beer, and safer than water in the 1830s.<sup>2</sup> Distilled liquor made up 10% of the manufacturing sector in 1810 United States.<sup>3</sup> Americans drank three times what they do today in 1800<sup>4</sup> and there were reportedly more distilleries than towns in the state of Vermont by 1820.<sup>5</sup> By the 1830s, the problems with alcohol had become ever more apparent. Temperance was the answer.

In Montreal, members of the city’s three temperance unions largely escaped a cholera epidemic that killed many in the immigrant populations there. This was used as evidence for health of temperance behavior in the 1830s.<sup>6</sup> It was also around this time that the medical field began looking into “dangers” of alcohol on the body – William Beaumont, the first American doctor to study digestion, got his medical training in Burlington, St. Albans, and Plattsburgh and went on to contribute to other early medical writers like Benjamin Rush, who were wary of alcohol.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ludlum, David M., *Social Ferment in Vermont* (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1966), p.65. --- This was less so the case in the mountains, where independent-minded sentiments held on, or the Connecticut River valley, where entrenched and conservative Congregationalists maintained religious order.

<sup>2</sup> Rorabaugh, W. J., *Prohibition: A Concise History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p.8

<sup>3</sup> Rorabaugh, *Prohibition*, p.11

<sup>4</sup> Rorabaugh, *Prohibition*, p.8

<sup>5</sup> Krakowski, Adam, *Vermont Prohibition: Teetotalers, Bootleggers & Corruption* (Charleston, SC: American Palate, 2016), p.26

<sup>6</sup> Cassedy, James H., “Early American Hangover” in *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Fall 1976) Vol.50, No.3, p.409

<sup>7</sup> Rorabaugh, *Prohibition*, p.8

A vibrant array of societies and movements sprung up around temperance in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By 1851, the largest was the American Tract Society, which had reported circulating five million temperance pamphlets in the United States. A teetotaler and reformed rum-seller from Albany, Edward Delavan, issued a broadside to every household in the state of New York, in addition to supplying every schoolroom in the state with “a colored drawing illustrating the diseased state of a drunkard’s stomach.” Between the years 1831 and 1834, the American Temperance Society enrollment jumped from 170,000 among 2,700 local groups to 1,250,000 members across 7,000 chapters nation-wide. That was nearly 10 percent of the country’s population.<sup>8</sup>

At the Temperance Society Meeting of 1836 at Saratoga Spring, the movement took a more extreme stance on alcohol. It decided for full teetotalism toward all “intoxicating liquor” instead of just advocating for the prohibition of distilled spirits, as it had before. This decision quickly spread to all local societies across the country,<sup>9</sup> but introduced a “communion dilemma” about fears that the policy went against bible’s communion wine. Efforts soon followed to biblically demonstrate that sacramental wine was really unfermented grape juice. The 1836 convention also expanded internationally. Canadian temperance organizations joined to create a newly-banded American Temperance Union.<sup>10</sup> By the 1850s, efforts had solidified in many state to enact referendums that either allowed or disallowed the issuance of liquor licenses in this first iteration of public option.<sup>11</sup> In Clinton County NY, Judge Platt of Plattsburgh said in an 1833 public address:

*It is a lamentable fact, that, upon a careful estimate, if is found, that of the tavern-keepers and retailers of ardent spirits in this State, during the last forty years, more than two-thirds have become drunkards. The law which licenses the sale of ardent spirits, is an impediment to the temperance reformation. Whenever public opinion and the moral sense of our community shall be so far corrected and matured as to regard them in their true light, and when the public safety shall be thought to require it, dram-shops will be indictable, at common law, as public nuisances.<sup>12</sup>*

Platt is encouraging the moral advancement of temperance over (or at least prior to) legislative or political push. As the 1800s progressed, this scale would tip more toward political action and away from personal choice. Almost every small town in the Champlain Valley likely had a chapter of one Temperance Society or another. By 1832, around 200 Temperance society clubs had been founded in Vermont alone.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Rorabaugh, *Prohibition*, p.14

<sup>9</sup> Merrill, John L., “The Bible and the American Temperance Movement: Text, Context, and Pretext,” *The Harvard Theological Review* (Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Harvard Divinity School, 1988), Vol.81, No.2, p.148

<sup>10</sup> Porter, Eugene O., “An Outline of the Temperance Movement” *The Historian* (Wiley, Autumn 1944), Vol.7, No.1, p.57

<sup>11</sup> Porter, “An Outline of the Temperance Movement,” *The Historian*, p.59

<sup>12</sup> Lees, Frederic Richard, *Textbook of Temperance, 1815-1897* (Rockland, ME: Z. P. Vose & Co, 1869), p.201

<sup>13</sup> Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont*, p.70

These efforts were not in vain. Across the country alcohol consumption would already dropped by half between 1825 and 1850, but the issue remained hugely influential through the end of Federal Prohibition.<sup>14</sup>

Of the many religious and social issues that revolved around the Temperance Movement prior to the Civil War, the most important and most closely tied was Abolition. The nation as a whole dealt with this deathly-contentious issue, as did local communities and individual families, North and South.

A Vermont handbill titled “Freemen of Chittenden County” from 1844 cloaks the issue of temperance in the language of slave vs. free: “We are not warring against liberty – we would set the intemperate free from an enslaving vice, and remove the tyrant of temptation...” It finishes climactically with “We look to Fathers and Mothers and entreat them to cast their whole weight of influence for the well being of their sons and daughters! In a word, we invite all who can *speak or write*, or *weep*, to stir up the Freemen of this country to right ACTION. Let every tax payer say, ‘*I will not be taxed without my own consent.*’ And let every freeman declare ‘as for me and mine. WE WILL NOT BE SLAVES!’”<sup>15</sup> This dramatic language is not unusual from groups that felt the sins of intemperance and slavery were closely aligned. Indeed, one of Frederick Douglas’ most cited speeches, given in Ireland in 1845, was titled “Intemperance and Slavery.”<sup>16</sup>

Prior to the Civil War, “temperance pledges” were the primary mechanisms used by these groups. Their aim was to dry up families and communities through the personal choices of community members and local social pressure. This was quite effective in the first phase of temperance, and as much as half the population is cited as taking a temperance pledge at the peak in the 1850s. Pledging and organizing in these societies was a role that was embraced, encouraged, and often largely orchestrated by women within a community. Women made up 60% of temperance movement in the early phase.<sup>17</sup> This widespread support by individuals, a “dry” majority in many places, made the 1850s a decade of relatively easy prohibition legislation, beginning with the famous Maine Law in 1851. Prohibiting the manufacturing and traffic in “intoxicating liquor,” this law was the model which many other states, including New York and Vermont, emulated in their own legislatures over the next ten years, most of which failed quickly. New York’s attempt was quickly ruled unconstitutional by a Democratic Governor. In Vermont, the law would stay on the books longer than anywhere else, until 1904.

Vermont’s 1852 law prohibited sale but not “the manufacture by any one for his own consumption and use, of any fermented liquor.”<sup>18</sup> The vote was passed by only a small majority, but remained on the books for fifty years. The major questions remain: “How dry was Vermont before Prohibition?” as asks a recent Chittenden County

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<sup>14</sup> Rorabaugh, *Prohibition*, p.15

<sup>15</sup> Graffagnino, J. Kevin et al, *Vermont Voices, 1609 Through the 1990s: A Documentary History of the Green Mountain State* (Barre VT: Vermont Historical Society, 1999), p.154

<sup>16</sup> Zaeske, Susan, “Hearing the Silences in Lincoln’s Temperance Address: Whig Masculinity as an Ethic of Rhetorical Civility,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* (Michigan State University Press, Fall 2010), Vol.13, No.3, p.403

<sup>17</sup> Rorabaugh, *Prohibition*, p.14

<sup>18</sup> “How Wet Was Vermont Prohibition,” In Chittenden County Historical Society Bulletin (Burlington Vt.: Chittenden County Historical Society, Summer 2019) Vol.48, No.3., p.6 --- Is it possible this could be seen as a rural state punishing its urban centers while still allowing for personal consumption by farmers? Were wets opposed to this exception?

Historical Society Bulletin (Summer 2019). No clear answer is provided, but the general consensus is “not particularly dry.”— so how do temperance prohibition function? Why did Vermont not alter its first-phase prohibitory laws earlier, like other states that passed versions of the Maine Law? It is possible that the movement toward local option actually functioned to strengthen enforcement of prohibitory laws.